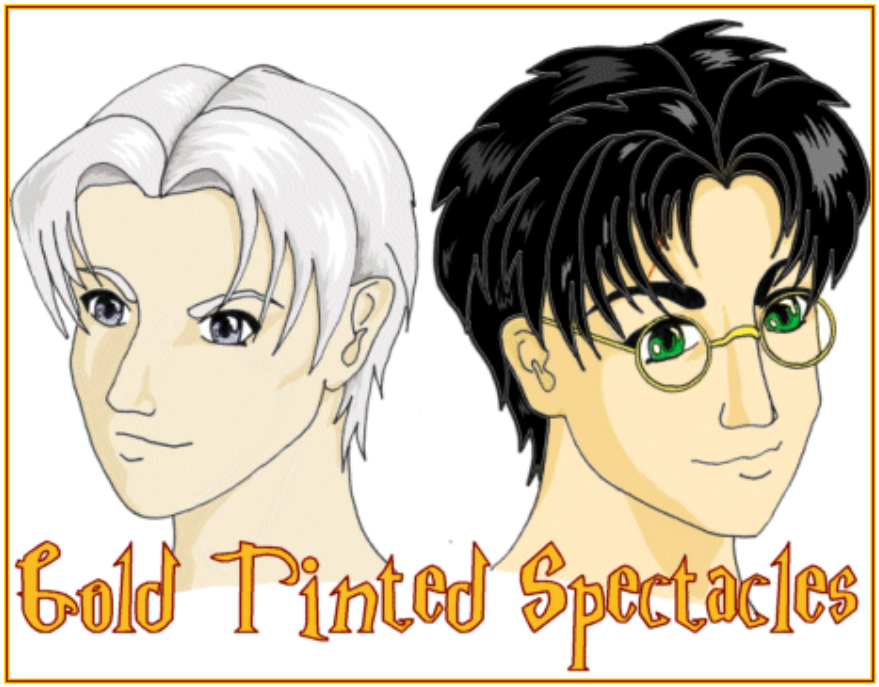

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Summary: Harry is about to enter his seventh year, and things are not quite what he expected. He is no longer the angry boy who watched his world fall apart at the end of his fifth year, but neither has he completely found his place yet. He is looking for someting, and to his confusion it seems to have something to do with Draco Malfoy.
Author's Notes: Thanks to everyone who posted feedback when I was uploading this in parts and after it was finished. This is the re-edited version which hopefully removes the mistakes that people spotted and improves on the original draft.
As always I have to thank my beta - she re-read this for me to make sure I hadn't edited in any mistakes :).

Chapter 1 A Beginning

Harry sat looking out of the bedroom window thoughtfully. Everything should have been normal. He was free of the Dursleys, Summer was almost over and school was starting again, his seventh and final year. There did not appear to be any immediate threat on the horizon, and so far everything seemed to be going along perfectly. That, however, didn't stop Harry feeling quite strange about everything.

Technically in the wizarding world he was of age since he had already had his seventeenth birthday, which allowed him to perform magic legally anywhere he chose; no more worry about the Ministry and talk of breaking his wand. It was a relief to know that he was considered adult enough to do as he saw fit and it was liberating, but also a little unnerving. He had been at the Burrow for a little over a week now and Ron had been encouraging him to do magic at every opportunity. If there was any distance to be covered his friend insisted that they Apparate, and Harry was beginning to come to the conclusion that they were more annoying than the twins had been when they had first learned.

Dumbledore had sent the young man the form to apply for his Apparating Licence on the 31st of July already filled in; all he had had to do was sign it. Mad-eye Moody had taken him to the Ministry five days ago and Harry had passed first time, much to Ron's chagrin since the redhead had had to take his test twice; once at Easter when Ron had failed and once at the beginning of the Summer.

Everyone had been very pleased, but Harry didn't know what all the fuss was about -- quite frankly he didn't like Apparating. It wasn't that he wasn't good at it, he had actually picked it up strangely easily, but it felt harsh and unpleasant. This was an opinion that no one else seemed to hold and hence was another strange feeling to add to all the others which appeared to be trying to make up for the fact that last year had been nothing to write home about.

Harry knew he was brooding, but he needed to straighten things out in his head and he wanted to understand the progression of events which seemed to be trying to change his life -- again. The sixth year at Hogwarts had been surprisingly uneventful: Voldemort had not shown his hand and although there had been various Death Eater attacks nothing major had occurred. It had been a little difficult at school when he had first started because of the subjects he wanted to take and certain teacher's prejudices. Even though his OWL results had been significantly better than expected it had taken something else to smooth the way for his NEWT choices. For once Harry had not asked what, but he remembered the way McGonagall and Snape had spent half a term glaring at each other and he suspected it had something to do with his head of house.

The most talked about event of the whole twelve months had been the escape from Azkaban of the Death Eaters imprisoned there after the debacle at the Department of Mysteries.

It was funny, over the past year Harry had found it very difficult to think of that time and yet now he was dwelling on it. Sirius' death had changed him greatly -- he knew that, and he had avoided the subject completely for a long time, even in his own thoughts. Last year he had tried to be more the Harry Potter people remembered, what Ron cheerfully referred to as 'the Gryffindor hero' rather than the angry boy he had been through most of his fifth year. He was not a prefect and yet he couldn't escape the fact that other pupils seemed to look to him as if he was. It seemed to Harry as though his restored integrity put him above the rest of the student body in his fellows' eyes.

The brooding youth knew he had been avoiding the whole issue of Sirius' death and it had taken him all the Summer after his godfather had died to realise that he preferred himself before his fifth year. He had taken the pain deep down inside and tried to be what every one wanted him to be.

All year he had played a role. On the outside he had shown people a calm, sometimes cheerful face. Harry had talked with his friends and pretended that he had moved beyond Sirius' death. He had been made Quidditch captain for Gryffindor and they had happily wiped the floor with Slytherin. It had almost been like before: Harry against Malfoy, Gryffindor against Slytherin, almost back to simple school rivalries.

It had been nice, but of course Harry knew the truth, he knew he would one day end up a killer or an obituary in the Prophet, and it made him separate. There was part of him he did not let out, part of him that his friends' love had not been able to reach over the whole of the school year and suddenly, as he considered his world, this bothered him. Harry thought that Hermione knew there was something about him, but she had not questioned him and she had not mentioned it to Ron.

Thinking about it now, the thing was, Harry knew he was no longer the same as he had been last year either. The hollow empty place he had inside him that had opened up like a chasm when Sirius had fallen through the veil had changed. He could pinpoint the exact day it had transformed; it had been towards the middle of the Summer holidays three days before his birthday. Up until that point the Summer had been what he considered normal: his relatives had been being their ordinary, nasty selves, although these days they ignored him rather than anything else, and he had been doing his homework and sending owls to Ron, Hermione, Tonks and Remus as usual, and then he had woken up knowing that the world had just shifted. It was that simple -- no doubt, no second-guessing, Harry had known.

At first he had not understood what was different; he had not been able to explain exactly what he felt. Harry had suspected Voldemort's influence, maybe some trick to worm his way into his mind, but his scar had not been hurting and there were no signs. His Occulmency training had sharpened his mind far beyond the tricks the Dark Lord liked to play and he had discarded that idea quickly.

It had taken him until his birthday to realise he was completely unafraid of this new knowledge and it was as if something had clicked into place in the universe and become right. Harry had been considering it ever since and he did not know what the rightness was, but he knew he had to find its root. The empty place was no longer just a hole that could never be filled; it felt like a slot inside his soul that was looking for something. Harry did not understand the feeling and it confused him somewhat, but he knew he was not afraid and he knew he had to search out the cause. It had occurred to him to tell Dumbledore or Hermione what had happened, but something had held him back. It was something that was still preventing him talking to anyone about what was happening.

It was the strangest thing as well: since that morning, when he thought of Sirius he did not want to close his mind and forget. The grief was still there but the anger had fallen away. On the first night he had realised this he had cried, sobbing his sadness into his pillow as he never had before, and ever since Harry had felt a little better. His godfather was gone but his memory was kindled in Harry's mind. There was still the guilt, but it had dimmed to a manageable level that meant he did not have to bury it anymore.

It was all such a sudden change and sometimes Harry thought that the ideas crowding his head were bound to spill out. His mind was so full as if everything he had been hiding from for the past year was coming out at the same time, and yet he was not overwhelmed. Even as he watched Ginny tear across the garden after George, or possibly Fred, he did not feel as if he was sinking.

"What y'doing, mate?" Ron asked brightly as he came wandering into the room.

"Watching Ginny terrify George," Harry replied and turned to his friend with a grin. "I think when we made her lead chaser we created a monster."

"Nah," the lanky boy said and dropped onto the bed, "she was that all by herself before we did anything."

Ron had had yet another growth spurt at sometime over the holidays, probably something to do with his mother's cooking, and Harry was sure his friend was six foot three if he was an inch. Ginny was no more than five foot six, but her almost-adoptive brother had no doubt the girl could hold her own against all her siblings. They lapsed into silence as Harry glanced back out the window to where the only Weasley daughter had just tackled whichever twin she had been trying to catch. Harry smiled fondly.

"You're not finally going soft on our Ginny are you?" Ron asked in a dubious tone and drew the pensive boy's attention back from his thoughts again.

"Well what with you and Hermione making doe eyes at each other all the time," Harry replied and schooled his features into a wistful expression, "maybe I'm considering it."

His best friend looked a little anxious at that. Ginny's crush on The Boy Who Lived had been legendary but they both knew the girl had moved on and Harry could see all the nasty possibilities working their way through Ron's mind.

"Um, Harry," the obviously uncomfortable boy started rather awkwardly, "you, um, well that is..."

Ron was clearly in big brother mode but did not appear to know what to say and Harry blinked at him innocently for a few moments. He couldn't help but grin when he saw suspicion slowly begin to dawn on his friend's face.

"Don't frighten me like that!" Ron protested loudly. "God, I thought you'd gone soft in the head or something."

With a laugh Harry climbed to his feet and stretched the kinks out of his back, enjoying the moment. It felt like it had been such a long time since he had been able to tease Ron without worrying about the rest of the world, or do anything without worrying about the rest of the world for that matter. He knew he had many things to think about but it felt like he was waking back up to the universe after a long sleep and Harry decided to enjoy it.

"The sun's out, it's the last day of the holidays," he announced suddenly. "What on earth are we doing inside?"

Ron's face broke into a wide grin at that.

"Couldn't have put it better myself, mate," his friend commented and stood up beside him. "Shall we?"

With a flourish the boy produced his wand and Harry followed suit.

"The apple tree?" he asked jovially.

"See you there," Ron replied brightly and pointing his wand at himself Disapparated with a loud pop.

Shaking his head and grinning wryly Harry gritted his teeth and then did the same.

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Their last day of freedom went very quickly and before Harry knew it they were on platform 9 and 3/4 meeting up with Hermione and climbing onto the Hogwarts express. In the excitement of seeing everyone again and going through the usual greetings, Harry almost forgot that the world had transformed. Until the initial exuberance of going back to school was over he barely thought about the changes the Summer had wrought. Only when Hermione and Ron settled into talking together did Harry find himself looking out another window, and as the train trundled through the English countryside he was reminded of his thoughts.

Harry found himself pondering everything again, but nothing would sort itself out in his head. He was waiting for something, a clue or a sign that would show him the right way, and it was doing no good trying to rationalise it all until he found it. When Ron stood up and excused himself to go to the loo Harry pulled his eyes away from the window and he caught Hermione looking at him. Their gazes locked, but only as their friend closed the door to the compartment did she speak.

"There's something different about you," she said quietly and paused for a moment. "You look ... better."

Harry did not quite know how to reply, but after a while he smiled at her.

"I think I am," he told her honestly.

"I'm glad," Hermione said with a smile of her own.

Then she picked up the book she had had sitting on her lap since the beginning of the journey and finally began to read it. It was not the longest conversation in history, but Harry realised that they had said what they needed to say. He felt a little more comfortable and went back to looking out of the window, hoping that he would begin to understand what he was looking for soon.

It was when the train reached the platform at Hogsmeade that things took a turn for the more strange. That was when Harry's eyes landed on Draco Malfoy for the first time that school year, and he felt every cell in his being sit up and take notice.

There was something very different about the Slytherin as Harry caught sight of him through the crowd of milling pupils, and it had nothing to do with the fact that he was wearing his hair slightly longer so it fell around his face, or that he had grown taller over the holidays. It was the way he didn't seem to be listening to his constant companions, Crabbe and Goyle, and that he looked as though he

was deep in thought. Even when he glanced up and caught Harry watching him the patented Malfoy sneer did not instantly appear. Only when Crabbe noticed that the two boys were looking at each other did that expression grace the arrogant Slytherin's face.

"What you looking at?" Ron asked cheerfully as he bundled onto the platform.

"Malfoy," Harry said without thinking about it.

"Maybe this year that snake will get what's coming to him," the redheaded Gryffindor said acidly without seeming to realise that Harry was not in an adversarial mood.

"Maybe," The Boy Who Lived agreed quietly, knowing without a doubt that what he was looking for had something to do with the boy who had been his enemy from his first day at Hogwarts.

It should have been a very unsettling feeling, but somehow Harry found it puzzling, but not uncomfortable.

"First years this way," Hagrid's familiar tones broke the preoccupied wizard out of his thoughts and he looked up to see the half giant standing at the end of the platform.

It was a tradition that they would get off the train and greet Hagrid before making their way up to the school, and that is exactly what they did. Harry wondered briefly what Draco Malfoy could have to do with his search, but soon put him out of his mind and set his thoughts to starting the school year. Even though he was not a prefect, with one friend who was and another who was head girl, they needed to make it to the castle as fast as possible. Several people had thought he would be head boy, but Harry did not have expectations of grandeur and he was quite glad that honour had fallen to a Hufflepuff.

It was only later after the excitement of the sorting ceremony and the introduction of the first years, when he was finally lying in bed, that he realised something: Malfoy had not been at the evening's festivities, which was odd since he was a Slytherin prefect, and Dumbledore had only stayed for as long as was necessary.

====

Over the next two days Harry watched Malfoy. On the surface he acted and sounded like the same Slytherin who went out of his way to make other people's lives difficult, but to Harry it looked as if there was no feeling behind the act. When he spotted his quarry heading towards the library on his own, just after dinner, Harry decided he had had enough of waiting. He took the longer route to Madame Pince's domain but at great speed, and made it to the main door before the Slytherin. For his part Malfoy didn't even seem to notice him until he was almost on top of Harry.

"Hello, Malfoy," he said evenly when the boy finally glanced up.

His school nemesis looked at him blandly.

"Potter," Malfoy responded coldly, but to Harry's ears his voice was missing its biting edge.

Without any others to witness what was going on it seemed that the Slytherin could not be bothered to work up the energy to pretend that he wanted revenge. After his father's escape from Azkaban the previous year Malfoy had gloated at Harry and told him how his days were numbered, but now he seemed to not care.

"Welcome to our side," the words came out of Harry's mouth before he had even realised he was going to say them.

All the things he had been seeing over the past two days all added up in his brain and that phrase popped out of his mouth. Harry was actually quite surprised himself. For a moment Malfoy just stood there and stared and then his eyes hardened.

"He swore he wouldn't tell anyone," the furious boy hissed through his teeth. "I should have known that meddling old man couldn't be trusted."

Then before Harry could say anything the Slytherin turned on his heel and stalked away. Frozen into inaction at Malfoy's anger he had to run to catch up with his quarry. He managed to come shoulder to shoulder with him before they reached any of the well-trodden roots around the school.

"Dumbledore didn't tell me," Harry said emphatically and put his hand on Malfoy's shoulder to stop him. "He would never betray a confidence, not even for me."

The other boy stopped, but he shrugged off Harry's hand angrily.

"Too late, Potter," the Slytherin spat, "there's no other way you could know."

He turned to leave again but Harry moved faster and put himself in the way.

"I've been watching you," he admitted honestly and his companion actually looked surprised.

Then Malfoy's eyes narrowed again as if he didn't believe him for a moment.

"You were different when you got off the train," Harry decided that sharing his reasoning was the only thing he could do. They had been on opposites sides for so long, be it school houses or light and dark magic, that nothing short of blatant honesty was going to work. "I've known you six years, Malfoy, and over the last couple of those I decided to try and understand my enemies. I know more about you than you'd like to think and when I saw you on the platform I knew something had changed. You weren't at the feast and Dumbledore left as soon as he could. You've been acting the same, but you're not."

He refused to let the Slytherin look away and Malfoy actually appeared a little startled.

"Still quite a jump you made," he said coolly.

"Call it wishful thinking," Harry offered with a shrug.

That drew a raised eyebrow from the other boy.

"It changes nothing," Malfoy said suddenly his expression completely closing off again. "Stay away from me, Potter."

Then he pushed past Harry and went to leave.

"I know what it's like," the Gryffindor said without turning and heard Malfoy's stride falter. "I know what it's like not to be able to tell your friends things, to know that you're totally alone in some stuff no matter what anyone else tells you. If you want to talk I'm around."

Hurried but even footsteps started up again behind him and then Harry knew Malfoy was gone.

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"You're doing it again," Ron's voice cut through the repetitive thoughts that were wandering around inside Harry's head.

The distracted Gryffindor turned to his friend who was sitting across the study room table and tried to look apologetic. Ever since his little talk with Malfoy the young wizard had been trying to analyse exactly what he had said and why he had said it. It had been as if he was almost another person when he accosted the Slytherin and it had felt strangely inevitable. The searching feeling was still there at the back of his mind, but Harry was positive he had taken one step closer to finding what he was looking for.

"Sorry," he apologised, "what did you want?"

"You to stop staring into space like a loon," Ron said with a smile before his face became more serious again. "What's up, Harry, you've been acting weird since we got back?"

For a moment the young man considered brushing off his friend with platitudes, but something stopped him. He had hidden part of himself from those around him for a long time and it felt like now was a good point to at least start to change that.

"Something's coming," he said plainly.

The immediate reaction from Ron was a look of horror.

"You don't mean You-Know-Who?" his emotive companion whispered with wide, uncertain eyes.

Harry shook his head with a small smile: his best friend had such an expressive face and he could read him like a book. He remembered when he had been like that; everything he thought travelling across his expression. Life had changed that aspect of his character, but Harry appreciated it in his friend.

"No," he said calmly, "not You-Know-Who."

Harry did not use Voldemort's name for Ron's sake since it still made the redhead uncomfortable.

"I don't know what it is," the young wizard admitted openly, "but I know I'm looking for it. It's not bad."

There was a second when the conflicted Gryffindor almost told his friend that it had something to do with Draco Malfoy, but good sense told him that it was not the time. Ron was frowning at him thoughtfully now.

"You're sure it's not another of those dreams from Him?" his friend asked with concern.

This time Harry nodded, he'd never been surer of anything in his life. Dumbledore had taught him Occlumency the previous year and he could see through the things Voldemort sent at him, which happened occasionally. This had nothing to do with the Dark Lord at all.

"It's not like that," Harry told Ron with a thoughtful frown. "It's just something I know and it's like having a jigsaw puzzle without knowing what all the pieces are. The funny thing is when I figure out a piece it just slots into place without me having to do anything -- kind of strange."

His best friend looked at him steadily and then nodded.

"Whatever you say, Mate," Ron said firmly. "Just remember if you need help I'm here."

A warmth filled Harry then. He had missed the undemanding loyalty of confiding in Ron. He beamed at his companion and finally opened his textbook.

"Thanks, Ron," Harry said genuinely, "that means a lot."

"Now about this essay," his suddenly self-conscious companion changed the subject, looking a little embarrassed, "can you believe McGonagall gave us homework on the second day?"

Harry smiled and turned to the correct page in his book.

"No," he replied, slipping into normal pupil mode, "I think they mean to work us to death this year."

For once Harry's brain stayed on track and he was well into the essay when Hermione joined them. The young woman's head girl duties took her away from her friends quite a lot, but she always made it back to them eventually. Harry greeted her cheerfully, moved his books so she had room to put hers down, and then went back to writing.

"Harry says something's going to happen," Ron said after they had been sitting quietly for a few minutes.

Once it might have annoyed Harry that his friend seemed to need to tell Hermione what they had spoken about, but now he didn't really mind, after all the head girl was the brains of the operation.

"What kind of thing?" Hermione asked in a tone that suggested she was interested but not quite sure if it was her place to ask.

"I don't know," Harry replied, as open with the young woman as he had been with Ron, "just something. I'll know when I find it."

"You will tell us if it's bad won't you," the head girl said evenly, looking him right in the eye.

Harry gave her a very firm nod. He could see the curiosity behind his friend's gaze and he appreciated her curbing it for now. He did not think he would have that grace for long.

"But it's not bad, I promise," he said calmly, turning back to his essay.

"Just be careful, Harry," Hermione said and patted him on the shoulder, "you're important to us."

The young wizard gave his friends a smile to show that they were important to him as well and then he began writing again. It wasn't until he was riffling around in his bag for a spare quill, after he snapped the end off the one he was using, that he found the note.

> SH
> Meet me at the Whomping Willow, 11pm tomorrow
> FF

For a moment the initials confused Harry: he knew exactly who the note was from but couldn't work out the references. Then he smiled, of course: 'Scar Head' and 'Ferret Face', just a couple of the insults they had traded over the years. The Gryffindor put the parchment back in his bag feeling that another piece had just slotted into his puzzle and then went back to work.

Chapter 2 Talking

Harry walked up to where Malfoy was standing looking at the Whomping Willow and waited for the other boy to acknowledge his presence.

"I'm not exactly on your side," the Slytherin said eventually. "I just don't want to be one of them."

"There is no in-between," Harry said evenly, "not in this war."

They lapsed into silence again and finally Malfoy turned to look at his companion. His expression was the most open Harry had ever seen it. The young wizard appeared confused and not at all the evil bastard Harry had come to think he was.

"I know," Malfoy said quietly, "that's why I went to Dumbledore. They're all pawns, you know, every last one of them. The great Death Eaters -- they're as much slaves as they want to make the Muggles and yet they can't see it."

He lapsed into silence again, his eyes on the ground, his face thoughtful. Harry did not want to push him so he waited. It had to have been hard to let go of the hatred of six years and the Gryffindor did not want to scare his companion away. Suddenly Malfoy laughed and it was a sad little sound.

"I idolised my father you know," he said, and looked into Harry's face.

The boy's grey eyes were so sad and Harry's mind informed him that it was not fair, no one as young as them should have that look in their eyes. The thing was he had seen it before, he saw it every day when he looked in the mirror.

"The great Lucius Malfoy," Malfoy said derisively, "the man everyone is afraid of, only he's terrified of Him as well. He's as pathetic as the rest of them. I saw him this Summer, Voldemort himself. My beloved father arrived at the manor in the middle of the night and took me with him to one of their meetings."

Harry was surprised, he knew something must have happened to make the other boy reconsider his allegiances, but meeting Voldemort had not been at the top of his suspicions. Meeting the Dark Lord changed people, but in Harry's experience usually to dead or obedient lackeys. That Malfoy had come away neither of those was a credit to his character.

"They're like some secret school society," his companion was still speaking; "only you don't just get thrown out if you break the rules. My father wanted me to meet the great man himself, and do you know what I saw? A madman, a complete lunatic who really doesn't care who he gets killed, and they all worship him like he's some kind of god."

The laugh came out of Harry unbidden, but he couldn't help it. Malfoy glared at him for his trouble.

"What's so bloody funny, Potter?" the Slytherin asked pointedly.

"Sorry," Harry apologised, still not sure where the laugh had come from, "but if you'd asked I could have told you that. Did your father ever tell you why Voldemort wants me dead?"

Malfoy shook his head.

"It's all to do with a prophecy," the Gryffindor said, his tone surprisingly light, "and if he hadn't tried to kill me when I was a baby it would have been irrelevant. It's all absurd, almost as ridiculous as being famous because you didn't die."

Malfoy continued to glare at him for a few moments and then the edge of his mouth actually twitched into a partial smile.

"You have a very twisted sense of humour, Potter," the Slytherin said eventually, "I never noticed before."

"If you'd met my relatives you'd understand why," Harry said with a wry grin.

They looked at each other for a while; green eyes into grey and then Malfoy blinked and glanced away.

"I have to go," he said suddenly and began to walk without looking up again.

Harry watched him leave and the Slytherin was almost back to the entrance of the buildings when he stopped and turned.

"Thanks, Potter," he said shortly and then continued on his way.

====

The dormitory door closed with a quiet click after Harry slipped through it. It was past midnight since he'd spent a long time wandering around thinking after his meeting with Malfoy. He still didn't feel like sleeping, but he had things to do in the morning and knew he had to. It was as he was creeping across the room to his bed that he heard movement and the wayward Gryffindor knew what was coming.

"Harry, is that you?" Ron whispered across the room.

"No it's the Dark Lord himself," Harry replied lightly. "Of course it's me."

He then realised that his words could be taken the wrong way and he did not want Ron annoyed with him.

"Sorry if I woke you," he said apologetically.

The curtains to Ron's bed were open and the dark shape of his friend sat up against the moonlight coming through the window.

"You didn't, I was worried about you, couldn't sleep. Where have you been?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry felt a pang of guilt and headed over to his friend's section of the room. He'd been walking around in the dark outside the dormitory so it was not difficult to make his way across the darkened room. These days the wandering Gryffindor's night vision was so good he could have become nocturnal if he'd wanted to.

"Sorry, Ron," he apologised again, "I've just been strolling around thinking. I didn't mean to keep you up."

"Anything you want to talk about?" the other youth asked and Harry could imagine the worried little frown that would be on his best friend's face.

It was too dark to see anything clearly when the moonlight was behind the sitting boy, but the standing youth could picture Ron perfectly: wide-open eyes, slightly anxious twist to his mouth. Harry smiled into the darkness as he appreciated that his friend cared.

"No thanks," he said warmly. "It was just stuff, stuff that I've been putting off for a while."

"Like what?" it appeared that Ron was not in the mood to let Harry get away with avoiding the issue.

The preoccupied Gryffindor catalogued what he had been thinking about for a moment and it did not occur to him not to tell his friend.

"Sirius, Voldemort, Dumbledore," he said adding Draco Malfoy silently, "just stuff, nothing to worry about. Thanks for asking though, but I need to sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

There was silence from Ron as Harry turned to walk to his bed.

"Harry," his dorm mate said in a tone between dismissive and incredulous as the dark haired youth began to undress, "your 'just stuff' would terrify most people."

"Good night, Ron," Harry said with a smile to himself.

Maybe his friend was right, maybe his 'stuff' would terrify anyone else, but these days it was easier for the over-burdened boy to deal with. Last year he had borne it stoically; this year it didn't seem nearly so enormous.

There was a muffled reply as Ron lay back down. For a few moments Harry stood and listened to the sounds of sleep in the room and for the first time in a long while he felt connected to the people around him. It was a good feeling.

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The second meeting was arranged in the same way as the first when Malfoy slipped another note into Harry's bag. This time, however, the Gryffindor was the first to arrive and he stood around wrapped in his everyday cloak, waiting for Malfoy to show up. It was exciting and almost traitorous at the same time. Harry knew he couldn't tell Ron or Hermione about the Slytherin, it would be a betrayal of his new friend's trust, but Harry was also aware that he was actively lying to his friends. It was a quandary and quite frankly the young man could not understand why every time he considered it, he ended up firmly on Malfoy's side.

When the white head appeared out of the twilight Harry felt a strange sense of happiness run through him. He was unused to the feeling of exhilaration that the sight of Malfoy brought to him and he did not want to analyse it, just enjoy it.

"Potter," the other boy greeted with a nod, "sorry I'm late, had to dodge Snape."

"I have an advantage," Harry replied without thinking, "an invisibility cloak."

Malfoy looked surprised for a moment and then smiled. Harry thought it was the first genuine smile of happiness he had ever seen on his ex-nemesis.

"So that's why I've never been able to catch you sneaking around no matter where I stake out," the Slytherin said, seeming to enjoy the joke at his own expense.

"You stake me out?" Harry was quite surprised by the news; he had not expected to find that Malfoy took such an active interest.

"I spent most of the sixth year skulking in corners," his companion said openly, "and I never saw anything."

The Gryffindor found himself smiling as well, it was rather funny. It then occurred to Harry that he had just revealed one of his closely guarded secrets to the boy who had been his archrival. A week ago the whole situation would have sounded preposterous to him, but now there was a rightness about it that Harry could not contest.

"We used to be able to get Ron, Hermione and me under it," he said chattily, "but these days it will only take two of us at a push."

"Can I see it?" the Slytherin asked curiously.

Harry produced the cloak from under his normal one and passed it to the other boy.

"How did you get it?" Malfoy asked as he felt the material and investigated the garment with interest. "Incredible work."

"It was my dad's," Harry replied, finding that talking about his parent still brought a catch to his throat. "Dumbledore gave it to me my first Christmas here."

The Slytherin passed it back reverently as he heard whom it belonged to and they shared a look. In a way they had both lost their parents and the lightness was gone from between them.

"I had a letter from Father yesterday, it said it was from Mother, but it was definitely my Father's words," Malfoy said slowly. "It didn't say anything outright of course, but I think he's planning on enrolling me in his little sect as soon as I set foot back at the Manor. I can't go home again."

"Did you tell Dumbledore?" Harry asked, resisting the urge to put his hand out to the other boy. He did not think Malfoy would appreciate the gesture.

"Not yet," his companion said quietly and turned to look at the still willow. "I don't think I've quite accepted it, even after what happened; it's still my home."

The Slytherin fell silent, lost in his own thoughts and Harry decided to take a chance.

"What did he do to you?" he asked slowly.

Malfoy looked at him sharply, a defensive expression on his face. For a second Harry thought he had blown it, pushed too hard, but slowly his companion's features relaxed.

"Not yet," and at first Harry thought the other boy was repeating his last answer, "I can't tell you yet. I have to go."

And with that admission Malfoy walked away. It was not how Harry had wanted the meeting to end, but he felt as if they were on the edge of something. They had not taken that last step to complete trust yet, but it was almost there. Very strange that Harry was finding it so easy: he never would have thought that Malfoy would be included in his list of confidants. Harry wrapped his cloak around himself and turned towards Gryffindor tower.

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Harry was a little confused; actually he was a lot confused. Over the past two and a half weeks some of the facts that he had thought were set in his life had turned on their head and yet he did not feel as if his life was crumbling. In fact he felt the opposite -- it was as if his world was building up around him and turning into something mysterious and good.

That, however, didn't stop him having doubts and wondering occasionally what he thought he was doing. It also didn't stop Hermione looking at him every now and then with a worried little frown. It was late on the evening of her seventeenth birthday that his friend finally cornered him. The Gryffindors had given their most prominent female member a very good birthday party in the common room and celebrated until past midnight. Ron had staggered off to bed after giving his girlfriend a very sloppy goodnight kiss, but Hermione had already asked Harry to stay behind for a few minutes so they could talk.

Harry sat in one of the armchairs by the fire and patiently waited for his friend to say goodnight to the other revellers while mulling over the strangeness of his life. He smiled warmly at Hermione when she finally came and sat down in the chair opposite.

"Has it happened yet?" she asked plainly, playing with the necklace Ron had given her for her birthday.

"No," Harry replied honestly, "but things are changing."

Hermione looked into the dying embers of the fire thoughtfully after he spoke and Harry chose not interrupt her musings. If the brightest girl in the school had one problem it was that sometimes she thought too much, but today Harry let her have her moment.

"You seem so calm," the young woman said eventually; "I don't think I've ever seen you like this before. Harry, you've never been calm, not even last year when you were so quiet."

A small laugh escaped him then: he had to admit Hermione was right. His life had made him anything but calm even though he could keep his head in just about any situation these days.

"I'm not calm," he said honestly, "not all the time, it's just things are a little different this year than I expected and every now and then I take a little step back to look at them. You seem to keep catching me when I'm contemplating the universe."

That earned him a smile from his companion.

"So what's so different?" Hermione asked openly.

Several ways to start the explanation came to Harry at the same time, but he discarded them all and sat and thought for a moment. If he was honest with himself everything came back to Draco, although the confused young man had not quite figured out why yet. He could not tell Hermione about the Slytherin, but he wanted to explain somehow.

"I've noticed that people change," Harry began eventually, "and sometimes it's in a good way. I've been surprised this term and it has opened up a whole new world of possibilities."

Hermione looked taken aback, that obviously wasn't what she had been expecting.

"Anyone in particular?" she asked after a moment.

Harry gave her an enigmatic smile and looked at the fire.

"Could be," he replied without giving anything away.

A tutting sound came from his friend and he looked back to find her chewing her lip and contemplating him carefully.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Hermione decided with a resigned sigh. "You're going all Firenze on me."

Harry just grinned. He had never been compared to a centaur before.

"It's an image I'm exploring," he replied lightly, "dark, mysterious hero rather than wears-his-heart-on-his-sleeve Harry."

Now Hermione laughed.

"I think maybe you're just losing your mind," she said with a smile. "I don't know why I bother."

"Your life would be boring without me," Harry replied in kind.

"Now you sound like Malfoy," was Hermione's opinion on the matter.

For some reason that caused Harry's grin to grow even wider, but he soon found it wiped away by a yawn. He had taken Quidditch practice all afternoon and what with that and the party he was tired.

"Lessons in the morning," he said as the yawn subsided, "and I'm sorry but I need to sleep."

Hermione smiled and nodded as she stifled a yawn of her own.

"Thanks for staying behind, even if you didn't say anything again," she said and stretched out of the chair.

The young man mumbled something in return and climbed to his feet.

"Happy birthday, Hermione," Harry said warmly and gave his friend a peck on the cheek. "I will tell you eventually, I promise, I just don't know what to say yet."

His friend did not reply as the tired Gryffindor walked towards the boy's staircase. He really was going to have to give her something more soon or he knew Hermione would start asking awkward questions.

Chapter 3 More than Talking

They met at least once every other day now and they chatted about insignificant things and Quidditch, but Harry knew he wanted more. There was an uneasy trust between them and they confided small things, but they had not spoken about the Summer again. Harry made a decision as he walked to their habitual meeting place; tonight he was going to make Draco talk to him properly. It had not escaped him that Malfoy had become Draco over the weeks either and he had to watch himself when they were with other people.

"Couldn't get away from Mudblood and Weasel?" Draco asked as Harry walked to their sheltered spot.

The dark haired boy made a face.

"I wish you wouldn't call them that," he said plaintively, "they're my friends."

"Sorry, Harry," Draco apologised almost instantly, "it's habit."

Harry smiled at his companion as he heard the genuine sentiment in the other boy's voice.

"I know all about habits," he said lightly; "I've had to stop myself calling you Draco three times this week. I'd have to claim temporary insanity if anyone heard me."

Draco looked serious for a moment and Harry thought he was going to say something but his companion frowned and looked away. The Gryffindor knew he'd broken the connection between them and he didn't want that. Cursing his overactive tongue he tried to come up with a way to mend the break.

"Do you know what I hear when a Dementor comes near me?" Harry said suddenly, knowing that the only way to connect with his companion again was to reveal something more about himself.

Draco looked back at him startled by the sudden change in subject.

"My mum and dad dying," Harry ploughed on. "That's why I fell off my broom that time, they overwhelmed me."

"But weren't you too young to remember?" his companion asked, obviously horrified by the whole idea.

Harry shook his head.

"They find every bad thought," he explained quietly, "even if it is buried in your subconscious."

"God I hope I never meet one now," Draco said with a shudder. "I never knew what they did, not really. They must be terrifying for you."

"Greatest fear," Harry admitted and looked at his friend.

The blond boy was framed in moonlight, his hair forming a halo around his face and he appeared almost ethereal as he looked at Harry with his intense eyes. Only a few weeks ago Harry could never have imagined talking to Draco like this.

"I had a perfect childhood," the Slytherin said slowly as they looked at each other; "my parents spoilt me. Until Voldemort came back my father couldn't do enough for me, and until this Summer my mother doted on me, but I made a mistake."

Draco paused and looked at the ground, Harry waited for him to go on, knowing that he was about to find out something important.

"When father brought me home after meeting the Dark Lord I told him what I thought Voldemort was," the blond boy revealed eventually, "and I told him I didn't want to be a Death Eater."

There was silence again and on impulse Harry reached out and took Draco's hand. His tense companion did not resist.

"He took me down to the cellar and he used the Cruciatus curse on me until I begged him to forgive me," Draco said in little more than a whisper. "My own father used an Unforgivable curse on me. That's when I realised he was as bad, that the man I idolized was as crazy as his master."

Harry moved closer to his companion, feeling his pain as he confessed what his father had done. Betrayal by a parent -- to Harry it seemed worse than just losing them.

"My mother hasn't spoken more than three words to me since either," Draco said, looking into Harry's face, "she can barely look at me. I think I've disappointed her."

There was pain in the Slytherin's face, but a fierce pride as well and he almost glared at Harry.

"Voldemort used Crucio on me," he said evenly; "I know what it's like, how you'll give anything to make it stop."

They looked at each other for a long time and Harry could see his own pain mirrored in Draco and he wondered what his companion saw in his face. He did not want to let his friend be alone anymore and he wanted to make him feel something else, something good. Harry eyes flicked over Draco's face and stopped on the boy's taut mouth. He licked his lips and looked back up into grey eyes and he saw recognition there.

They stood facing each other poised on the edge of something and then as one they moved towards each other. Their lips met and Harry felt the pain flow away. His arms snaked round the other boy and Draco deepened the kiss, his lithe frame moulding to Harry's as they embraced. It was not like the awkward, stolen kisses Harry had shared with either of his girlfriends of previous years, and he could feel the passion running through the boy in his arms. They remained locked together for a long time, exploring with their lips and tongues and only reluctantly did either break the kiss.

Harry looked into Draco's face quite shocked by the feelings he found coursing through his body. The angelic boy smiled slightly as Harry blinked at him rather dazed.

"Didn't know you had it in you, Harry," his companion said quietly and then before Harry could put his brain back together Draco slipped out of his arms and disappeared into the late Summer night.

Harry watched as the blond head vanished from sight and then he leant on the stone wall with a thump. He had not known what he wanted from Draco and now that he had it he was rather overwhelmed. This was not what he had expected when he offered his hand in friendship to the other boy, but now, now it seemed just right. The empty place inside him felt suddenly not so hollow and with a start he realised that the searching need he had been feeling since the holidays, was gone. Harry did not need to question his psyche very hard to realise that he was in love with Draco Malfoy: it was quite a shock.

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It was such a simple thing really, just an accidental knock and things turned nasty. What made it worse was the fact that Harry was almost sure it was his fault: Draco had been watching him while trying to appear detached and aloof. When Harry had attempted a very rash brush of shoulders Ron had ended up in the way and the redhead had collided with the Slytherin. Draco had rounded with a sarcastic comment and Ron was obviously not in the mood.

"Why are you always around these days, Malfoy?" the volatile Gryffindor demanded hotly. "Every time we turn around there you are."

"Sure it's not just you noticing," Draco shot back with a smirk.

Ron glared and Harry could tell that his best friend's temper was heating up.

"Why would I want to notice a slimy git like you?" the redhead said angrily.

"Maybe the Mudblood isn't enough for you," Draco replied, knowing just where to hit with his words as usual, "maybe what you need is a man."

As Harry watched, all rational thought left Ron's face and he knew what would be coming next. Without thinking of any consequences he put himself between his best mate and his boyfriend.

"He's not worth it, Ron," Harry said firmly and looked his companion in the eye.

"Get out of my way, Harry," the redhead said menacingly, "the Ferret is mine."

It was not an idle threat either; Ron was the tallest of them all and playing Quidditch Keeper for three years had filled him out with as much muscle at any of the boy in their year baring Crabbe and Goyle. There was a murderous look in the redhead's eye.

"Let him through, Potter," Draco said nonchalantly. "This could be fun."

Harry shot his boyfriend a glare, sometimes Draco's mouth ran away with him and Harry did not need the interference.

"Ignore him," he said pointedly. "We need to get to the first lesson. Besides which the Quidditch season is almost here and I do not need you down with injury."

Logic rarely made any difference when Ron was going off on one, but the mention of Quidditch was an ace in the hole. The redhead still looked angry, but as Harry pushed him backwards down the corridor Ron moved. When he glanced at Hermione where she was walking beside them she was looking at him oddly and Harry did not like the ideas that crept into his head.

It was as they were headed towards the Transfiguration classroom, just before Hermione separated from them to go to the library, that the head girl cornered her prey.

"Ron, I just need to have a word with Harry for a moment," she said with her eyes narrowed on the now very nervous Harry, "would you mind saving him a seat?"

Knowing what was good for him Ron glanced at his friend in sympathy and then fled. Harry looked at Hermione with a mixture of dread and annoyance.

"What exactly was all that about?" she asked pointedly before he could say anything.

"All what?" the subject of her scrutiny tried to sound innocent, but knew he failed dismally.

"You know very well, what," Hermione said shortly, looking slightly worried. "Getting between Ron and Malfoy is like standing between two angry dragons. You're usually in there with Ron throwing punches. What is going on?"

Harry didn't know what to say: he did not want to lie and yet he knew he couldn't tell her the truth. 'I didn't want my best friend hitting my boyfriend' would probably go down like a lead balloon, not to mention what Draco would do if he found out Harry had told anyone.

"That chat we had about people changing," the besieged young man's heart sank as with practiced efficiency Hermione dragged up the conversation they had had weeks ago, "were you talking about Malfoy?"

"Why would I have been talking about him?" Harry tried to skirt around the issue without outright lying.

The head girl was looking at him hard again and he knew he was shortly going to be in very hot water.

"You've been acting strangely since the beginning of term," Hermione said evenly. "You sneak off when you think no one's looking, you stare into space like you're a million miles away and then you get between Ron and Malfoy. I know you Harry, something big is on your mind and this time I'm not taking 'I don't know yet' as..."

Any second Harry knew Hermione was going to ask him a direct question and he could not bring himself to refrain from answering, instead he went for diversionary tactics.

"I'm in love, really in love," he said honestly which stopped all sound coming from the young woman's mouth.

For a moment she just stood there staring at him as if he had grown another head, then Hermione smiled.

"Really?" she asked, almost beaming at him. "It finally happened then? Who?"

"Yes, really," Harry replied, actually pleased that he could tell her something; "if the bludger to the head and stomach feelings are to be believed."

"And was this the thing you were waiting for?" Hermione asked, her smile still wide on her face.

"It's part of it," he replied honestly, "most of it I think, but there's still something missing, but I don't know what."

He paused, wanting to tell his friend everything but knowing that he couldn't. Hermione saw his hesitation and opened her mouth to speak again.

"I can't tell you who," Harry confessed before she could ask again. "I want to, I honestly do, but I promised."

"Why, Harry?" his friend asked with a concerned frown.

"It's complicated," the conflicted youth replied, "and I can't explain or you'd know who."

Hermione just looked at him for a few moments and pursed her lips.

"You're not in trouble are you?" she asked slowly.

"No," Harry promised quickly, "oh, god, no, I'm not in trouble at all, in fact I'm further from trouble than I have been for years, but it really is complicated. I swear I will tell you the moment I can. Please, trust me Hermione and promise me you won't try and find out who I'm seeing."

For a moment Harry thought she would refuse, but eventually the young woman nodded. The acceptance brought a warm rush of love for his friend into the young man's heart.

"Okay, Harry," Hermione said thoughtfully. "I have to admit you look happier, but I'm still allowed to worry about you, all right?"

He smiled at her and then gave her a peck on the cheek.

"Worry all you want," Harry said warmly. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

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Things were a little weird in Harry's world these days, well weirder if you could get weirder than being the focus of a warlord's wrath. Harry and Draco were meeting everyday now and had been since their tryst of ten days ago. In fact they were meeting as often as they could: in dark corners; under the Quidditch stands; behind the door in the Potions classroom before anyone else came in. It was crazy. Harry wanted Draco all the time and he took anything he could get, anywhere. They still talked, one time they had talked until the early hours of the morning, but always there was the underlying current of attraction between them.

And Harry was feeling different, not just in an emotional way. It wasn't just that the universe felt as if it was right now; it was other things as well. The somewhat confused Gryffindor could not remember ever being so alive, and it wasn't just an illusion created by his emotions; in the latest Quidditch practice he had flown like he had never flown before. The rest of the team had actually stared at him in awe.

Then there was his school work: Harry had found himself asking questions he never would have considered before, as if his brain had gone up a gear or possibly just woken up. Snape had looked at him like he had another head when he'd put his hand up and asked something sensible. The Potions master had been so shocked that he'd actually answered without deducting house points.

The fact that Harry was sitting in his normal Tuesday morning Transfiguration lesson brought back the conversation he had had with Hermione the previous week. He was not sure how long he could keep the secret. He wanted to shout the truth from the top of the Astronomy tower. Harry was mulling this over and watching Professor McGonagall demonstrate a complicated transfiguration technique; another thing he would never have attempted before, musing and watching at the same time, when things became even stranger.

As his eyes followed the professor's wand hand and his ears listened to her incantation Harry's brain flipped out for a moment. For just a fraction of a second he saw bright metallic hues all around Professor McGonagall's wand that leapt at the stone as she cast her spell. It was breathtaking and almost blindingly bright which caused him to close his eyes. When he opened them again the light was gone and a rabbit sat on the table where a block of stone had previously been; which would have been fine except Harry also felt pain lance through his head.

"Harry," Ron said from beside him, "are you alright? You look peaky."

"I feel sick," the ailing boy said slowly as the stabbing pain resolved into a dull ache.

He looked at his friend while trying to decide if the nausea or the headache was worse. Ron was peering at him worriedly.

"You look awful, mate," his companion, said in his normal blunt manner; "maybe you should go and see Madame Pomfrey."

Harry considered this for a moment, but even as he did so the ache began to dissipate and his heaving stomach began to settle into only a slightly dodgy flip. Slowly he shook his head.

"I'm okay," he said, almost certain that he was; "it's passing. Maybe it was something I ate?"

"You sure?" Ron asked, looking at him seriously.

Harry knew that expression on his friend: it was Ron's 'you're not just being noble are you?' face, so Harry smiled at him.

"I'm fine, honestly," the recovering boy promised faithfully, "it's gone now."

It hadn't actually quite gone, but the strangely unconcerned feeling was coming back and driving anything darker from his mind. Harry turned back to the lesson and picked up his wand.

Chapter 4 More ... Simply More

The first Hogsmeade trip of the year was always a celebration for every pupil above the second year and even if Harry was feeling that his life was taking a left turn, he looked forward to it with all the rest. In an ideal world what he would have liked to do was gather up all his friends, including Draco, and drag them on a shopping trip they would never forget, but it was not an ideal world so he went to Hogsmeade with just Hermione and Ron.

As it was Harry knew something that Ron didn't and he was enjoying the anticipation of the shock that his best friend was bound to suffer. Ron, or rather 'Agent Weasley' according to his brothers, was under strict instructions from the twins to visit Zonko's and check out the competition to Weasleys' Wizards Wheezes. What Harry knew as an investor in said enterprise that Ron did not, since his brothers liked to shock their sibling, was that Fred and George had been expanding.

When the three friends walked around the corner so that they could see the joke shop Ron stopped dead. Zonko's had a large new sign that flashed garishly and announced to the world: "Zonko's - a subsidiary of Weasleys' Wizards Wheezes". Harry couldn't help himself, at the stunned expression on his friend's face he laughed.

"You knew," the redhead accused and turned on the amused Gryffindor, "and you let me prattle on about what we had to check out and everything on the way down here."

"They made me promise," Harry replied, still laughing, "and your face was priceless."

Ron looked annoyed and his face was beginning to go a lovely red. The famous Weasley temper was on the rise.

"I'm going to kill 'em," the redhead said pointedly and then stalked towards the shop leaving Hermione and Harry standing.

"Should we follow or stay here until they stop trying to hex each other?" the young woman asked pleasantly.

The still grinning youth just beamed at her and shrugged.

"Hexes in a joke shop could be bad," Harry pointed out. "Maybe we should take away Ron's wand?"

"You're the hero," Hermione commented lightly; "he's all yours."

"Coward," was the young man's response.

Despite their banter the pair trotted after their friend and entered the joke shop just in time to see Ron exiting the main area through a large oak door. There was a rather startled young woman standing behind the counter who appeared to be pointing the way.

"Don't worry," Harry said cheerfully as they moved to follow their friend, "they do this all the time. I think it's part of the brother ritual."

He did quicken his pace, however, when he heard a rather loud shout come from behind the door. Aiming for the hero code rather than chivalry, Harry turned the handle and entered first just in case any hexes were flying around, but as he looked around he couldn't see any damage. Ron was standing to one side next to the wall with his wand drawn.

"I made lists," the redhead was shouting, "I had a plan. I even colour coded the types of jokes for which Hermione laughed at me for two days, and it's all one big joke!"

"Ron," the twin nearest the door said conversationally.

"Little brother of ours," Harry thought it was George who spoke second.

"We appreciate..."

"...the effort, but we couldn't..."

"...resist."

The way Ron's face had little white spots on his cheeks did not bode well for where the argument was going.

"I'll show you 'couldn't resist'," the redhead said vehemently and raised his wand.

Normally Harry would have let the brothers fight it out among themselves: it did not do to try and put yourself between family, but from a quick glance around he concluded that at least some of the equipment would explode if hit by the wrong spell. Hoping he wouldn't regret it Harry took a deep breath and launched himself at Ron. With surprise on his side he had his friend pinned to the wall in a couple of seconds.

"Not taking sides," the reckless Gryffindor said rapidly as Ron appeared ready to become even angrier, "but the whole place could go up."

It was probably an exaggeration, but Harry didn't think his friend was in the right frame of mind for the subtle difference. For a moment Ron glared at him, but eventually Harry felt the tension begin to flow out of the volatile young man.

Very slowly Harry relaxed and removed his hand from around Ron's wand hand and his arm from his best friend's neck. The bright red of the other Gryffindor's features was slowly fading and the avenging angel smiled sheepishly, breaking the whole apocalyptic image he had about him.

"Okay, Ron?" Harry asked as he rolled his eyes.

"Okay, Harry," Ron replied but sent his brothers another glare just for good measure.

"Ron, Ron, Ron," Fred said conversationally, "one day you are going to make a fantastically jealous husband for Hermione. You have the flying off the broomstick down to a fine art."

The jibe worked, Ron's face coloured again but this time he was far too embarrassed to be angry and Harry couldn't help but share a grin with the others in the room.

"I'll kill you later," the mortified boy muttered and looked at the floor.

Harry decided it was time to change the subject before Ron went off on one again, or melted into a puddle of goo at Hermione's feet.

"This is a fantastic lab," he said brightly, pushing his glasses back up on his nose from where they had slipped in the scuffle; "much bigger than your last one."

"One of the reasons we bought the place," George launched into an explanation.

"We outgrew the one behind the other shop," Fred finished off for him, "and this came with everything in it. Old Zonko knows how to stock an inventor's dream."

When Harry looked back at Ron his friend appeared a little miffed by the whole situation, but he was also looking interested which was a good sign. The Weasley temper was renown throughout the wizarding world, but it was usually short lived.

"Didn't he object to you muscling in on his territory?" the youngest of the siblings asked curiously.

"Nah," Fred replied with a grin, "the old man has been grooming us for this since the day we started Hogwarts. We've bought the premises and the rights to sell..."

"...his inventions but he still owns the patents," George took up the explanation. "They won't run out for years so he's retired on the proceeds. The percentage he gets should keep him until the day he dies."

Hermione appeared impressed, as did Ron, and Harry had no complaints about the twins' business sense; it earned him quite a nice income as well.

"So how's the new line coming on?" the dark haired boy asked cheerfully and perched on one of the stalls in the room.

That was it: all the twins needed to launch into cheerful descriptions of their weird and wacky inventions and a few demonstrations. By the time any of the others could put a word in edgeways the clock on the wall announced that a good half an hour had passed.

"We're supposed to meet Dean and Ginny in fifteen minutes in the Three Broomsticks," Harry pointed out when Fred and George paused for breath.

"And we haven't been to Honeydukes yet," Ron stood up straight from where he was leaning on one of the benches. "We can't go anywhere else until we've been there."

George had just dived under the sink on the other side of the room to retrieve yet another project and when he looked across at them Harry thought the young inventor appeared rather crest fallen.

"Sorry, mates," Harry, as ringleader of the trio, said a little guiltily, "we have to go. You know what it's like on the first weekend."

The twins shared a glance and then they both looked at their guests and smiled broadly.

"We remember," they said together.

Sometimes Harry thought it was like watching a person and their reflection when Fred and George did that.

"If we have time we'll try and pop back this afternoon," Hermione said cheerfully as she slipped her hand into Ron's.

The young woman's boyfriend didn't even seem to notice, as if the gesture was the most normal thing in the world, which made Harry smile to himself. Hermione saw his expression and gave a little smile of her own; he had a suspicion that his female friend had Ron exactly where she wanted him.

"We plan..." Fred said lightly,

"...to be here until about..." George took up the account.

"...five," his twin continued cheerfully. "Then we promised mum..."

"...we'd pick her up some stuff in Diagon Alley."

Exactly why or how the twins finished each others sentences was a mystery to Harry, but he suspected these days it was habit.

"Okay," he acknowledged with a grin, "we'll see you if we see you."

"Bye," Ron offered as the three Hogwarts pupils gathered to leave. "Can you tell mum thanks for the new scarf?"

The unfortunate Gryffindor's scarf had disappeared somewhere between the Hogwarts Express and the castle. His mother had sent him a howler and a new one at the same time.

"Sure, Little Brother," George said with a laugh, "just don't lose that one or you'll get more than a howler next time."

"Don't worry," Ron said earnestly and looked rather horrified, "the howler was enough. You'd think I lost the crown jewels."

Before anyone could launch into a discussion about Molly's temper Harry found himself being herded towards the door by Hermione. Giving the twins a little wave the young man turned and allowed himself to be manoeuvred in the direction of the exit.

"Oi, Harry," Fred's voice caught him before he made it to the door, "we forgot, we need your signature on a couple of things."

Ron and Hermione paused as Harry stopped and turned and they appeared ready to follow him back into the lab but he stopped them.

"You go on," he said lightly, "if you don't get to Honeydukes before the third years do they'll clean out all the good stuff."

It was a well known effect of the first Hogsmeade weekend; once the third years found the sweet shop there would be nothing left for anyone else. Ron looked slightly put out again and Harry suddenly realised that he had probably said the wrong thing. Fred and George did not leave Ron out of their business dealings on purpose, except when they were playing jokes like today, but it probably seemed

to their youngest brother that he was being ignored. This time, however, Hermione stepped in to the breach.

"The smell of the lab's beginning to make my nose run," the young woman said and rubbed her face for good measure. "Come on, Ron," she continued enthusiastically, "let's go and find some ice mice for Neville. I still can't believe Crookshanks stole his last one. That cat is really the limit some times."

With Hermione on side there was no arguing from Ron and she all but dragged him into the front of the shop leaving Harry to return to the twins.

"Sorry about this, Harry," George apologised brightly, "but with Bill breathing over our shoulder to make sure this is all legal we need your paw print."

They placed a couple of pieces of parchment down on the bench in front of their original investor and handed him a quill. Harry scanned both documents quickly, just to make sure they were not some new gags the twins had thought up, and then he quickly signed them. All in all it was a painless experience.

"So what's our little brother been up to so far then?" Fred asked conversationally and Harry began to realise that maybe forgetting the papers had not been so innocent.

"Nothing I'm going to tell you," he said cheerfully but firmly, ever the loyal Gryffindor. "I went along with the whole 'not telling him' joke and that's all the cooperation you're going to get."

Both twins gave him an innocent expression, which really did not suit them.

"But Harry, since we left school you're our..." Fred complained good-naturedly.

"...only source of blackmail material for little Ronnikins," George finished with a grin. "It's getting harder and harder to torture him."

"Which is what brothers are for," Fred explained in a very patient tone with his hand over his heart.

Harry put his hand to his head and made a dramatic sigh.

"What you ask would break the sacred bonds of best friends," he said with as much theatrics as the twins had used. "I couldn't possibly."

When he'd finished both Weasleys were looking at him quite surprised, but after a second Fred grinned and George looked under the bench.

"What did you do with Harry Potter?" the twin closest to him asked. "I'm sure ours didn't used to be a drama queen."

"Over the top?" he asked lightly. "I'm trying out new images: Hermione thinks I'm going all Firenze on her so I thought I'd see how Lockheart would fit."

The twins laughed at that and shared a look that Harry was pretty sure he'd seen Hermione use several times this term already. It felt good to just be able to mess around and it appeared that the Weasley's had noticed the change in him. That did make him ask himself how drastic the alteration actually was, and how bad he had been last year, but Harry was in too good a mood to dwell on the thoughts.

"The only things we want your autograph on are these forms," George said firmly.

"Oh, and there I was having photos printed up specially," Harry replied with an impish grin.

"Be gone foul fiend of bad taste," Fred said dramatically and the subject of his mock scorn burst out laughing.

It appeared the twins could overact beautifully as well. Harry turned to the door. He had to catch up Ron and Hermione before his hot tempered friend became paranoid.

"See you, guys," he said cheerfully and headed out.

"Bye, Harry," the pair chorused together. "Thanks for delivering our little brother into our plot," George continued.

"And, Harry," Fred added in a tone that caused the retreating Gryffindor to turn, "nice to see you back on form."

He gave then a warm smile, waved and then walked out of the room. He felt happy and cheerful and it hadn't been for the fact that he couldn't carry a tune he might have started whistling. As he made it into the street Harry began to consider Ron and Hermione. The continually bewildered look his best friend seemed to have every time his girlfriend kissed him jumped into Harry's mind. It occurred to the third wheel, as he cast himself, that the pair were always hanging out with him and never seemed to have time alone and Harry couldn't help thinking this was not right.

Glancing back at Zonko's he began to formulate an idea. Harry was sure the twins wouldn't mind him using them as an excuse and if Hermione and Ron thought he was talking business they would let him go off on his own, thus leaving them to do the couple thing. With a smile and a plan, he trotted down the road.

Harry wandered cheerfully into Honeydukes to find his two friends already picking up things from around the shop. Who ever said that people grow out of sweets hadn't met Albus Dumbledore or the majority of the Hogwarts seventh year. Harry joined Ron and Hermione quickly, placing a cheerful hand on his best friend's shoulder.

"Business talk all finished?" the redhead asked a little churlishly.

"It was just a couple of forms to sign, Ron, and yes, it's finished," Harry said brightly. "You're lucky you missed it -- completely boring. I have to head back a little later, something about Bill owling some papers over, but I'm sure you two can find something to do whilst I'm gone."

He gave them both a suggestive look and once again Ron forgot to be annoyed when he blushed as he glanced at Hermione. Harry found it very endearing how his friend could be openly affectionate with his girlfriend in front of anyone, but the moment someone mentioned it he went a lovely shade of red. Harry knew he was picking up bad habits from Draco: he was finding Ron far too easy to tease.

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Harry sat in the Three Broomsticks with a butterbeer on the table in front of him and let his mind meander around. The thought of Ron and Hermione in Madame

Puddifoot's teashop made him smile: it was nice to see his two best friends so happy and in love. Letting his mind wander over the subject brought his train of thought round to his own predicament. Harry had no doubt that he was also in love. He had told Hermione as much and he knew that he had spoken nothing but the truth.

Casting his mind back over six years the current state of affairs rather amazed the smitten youth. He was in love with Draco Malfoy; the boy he had hated for a good percentage of his life, and it felt perfectly right. It felt as if the universe had shrugged and rearranged herself into what was supposed to be, rather than what had been. This was the correct path and years of vengeful hatred were nothing but a bad memory and a mistake.

The thing was, although something in Harry's soul knew this, the logical part of his brain that most people thought didn't exist, was pointing out how completely bizarre the whole situation was. A little voice at the back of his head was going 'I know what every instinct in your body is screaming, but don't you think this is odd?', and it was. Draco Malfoy, for heaven's sake, the most vindictive, petty, bully in the school; only Harry knew that wasn't the case anymore.

The Slytherin Prince, who made it his mission in life to torment all those beneath him, was gone. A boy had gone home after the sixth year and had come back a man, his eyes open, his decisions made. Rhetoric fell from Draco's mouth now only because he played a role and Harry was one of the few people who knew what his boyfriend truly believed.

Picking up his butterbeer Harry took a swig and let the liquid swirl around his mouth a mirror of what his thoughts were doing in his head. There was no changing the truth and he silenced the small voice for the last time. The young man had not known what he wanted from Draco until their first kiss: he had not recognised the need in himself then, but he recognised what had grown from it.

It was hard to believe that is had only been two weeks since their lips had first met. Two weeks of passionate kisses and over the clothes groping. Fourteen wonderful, desire filled days that had led Harry to one inescapable conclusion -- he wanted more. He was inexperienced and he had never been very good at relationships and physical contact; he knew this and did not try and deny it. With his two girlfriends he had never known what to do or say properly, and even with help from the long-suffering Hermione his attempts at love had both unequivocally ended. With Draco everything was different.

If he let himself admit it Harry knew why as well. Cho had been a crush, a simple infatuation with an idea rather than a real person. Harry had known there was something missing in his life and he had come to the logical conclusion that Cho could fill that spot, and backed up by teenage hormones he had gone after the fiction. It had been almost enough to scare him off girls for good.

Then there had been Briony who was the opposite of Cho, tall and blond and more into books than boys. Getting together with Harry had been something of an accident after they were paired together for a DADA project. Looking back he realised that that, in and of itself, should have given him a clue. He smiled and took another swig of his drink. At least that relationship had sort or petered out rather than ended in a public bust up. Thinking about it now it seemed obvious that Briony had been more of a need to conform to what people expected than anything else.

Every move with both of his girlfriends had been fraught with confusion and misunderstanding. Harry could see that now, but when it came to Draco it was so different. Sometimes he thought that maybe he was possessed because it felt like another person was controlling his body. Cold logical thought had no place in his actions and he moved through the relationship on instinct, following his heart at every turn, and now his heart demanded more.

Harry ran his hand through his hair thoughtfully as he considered Draco silently. His boyfriend was far more experienced when it came to sex than Harry; that much was plainly obvious. Although he often instigated the encounters Draco always ended up in the lead and Harry knew for a fact that his boyfriend was holding off anything too heavy. Sometimes Harry thought he had 'Virgin: treat with care' tattooed on his forehead because the only time he'd tried to take things a little further than fondling through clothes, Draco had slowed the whole thing down and backed off. It was absurd but Harry felt as if his boyfriend was trying to protect him.

It was a little frustrating to say the least, but filled the needy part of him with a strange warmth never the less. Draco wanted to keep him safe, so Harry knew he was going to have to show the Slytherin that safe could be a whole lot more than where they always made it to now. With his plots in mind Harry grinned to himself as he realised what he was considering: his Slytherin side had to be coming out because he was calmly planning to seduce his boyfriend. This was going to take some doing as well as some time to figure out and drinking the last of his butterbeer Harry began to formulate a strategy.

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There were very few things that surprised Draco Malfoy, but, as it was turning, out Harry Potter was one of them. From the first offer of friendship up to their evening together earlier, Harry had managed to surprise the pureblood wizard at every turn. It had been a shock when Potter first offered him someone to talk to and he had dismissed the idea to begin with, but his loneliness had been too great. The Gryffindor had known exactly how he was feeling and Draco had not been able to resist that. Harry made him happy in a way he never thought he would feel again.

Draco was lying in bed looking at the canopy of his four-poster remembering an evening that he would never have guessed at. If there was one person in the school that Draco would never have put down as a seducer it was Harry, and yet that was what his boyfriend had turned out to be. Oh they'd been more than just talking partners for three weeks now, but Draco had never even considered what would come next. The carefully planned seduction had been the furthest thing from his mind, but he smiled as he remembered it.

Harry had requested that they meet somewhere warmer than their normal rendezvous near the Whomping willow and Draco had turned up at the disused girls' toilets thinking that it was a very strange place to talk. He closed his eyes and remembered what he had seen when he walked in: candles, over half the room there had been candles of all different sizes. The golden light of flame had lighted the whole place, and in the middle of it all had sat Harry Potter on a blanket set on the floor. He had smiled at Draco and the Slytherin had known that he had let his guard down and shown the other youth his true feelings.

"Like it?" the Gryffindor had said.

Draco didn't really remember what he had replied but he did know that it had

made Harry laugh. Draco had not registered when his barbs had changed from trying to hurt The Boy Who Lived to trying to make him smile, but it had happened and it continued. Even when they had first begun to talk Draco had thought it was a phase he was going through, a moment of weakness that would leave him again, but he had found that Harry was addictive.

Draco opened his eyes again as he remembered the green gaze that had pinned him down across the room and challenged him.

"Much warmer than the alcove near the willow," Harry had said; "much more comfortable for a little snogging."

And Draco had believed him; he almost laughed at himself, but bit back the sound that could alert his dorm mates. Harry Potter, pure as the driven snow – the idea that the whole evening was a seduction had never entered the victim's head. Draco Malfoy, the boy who could have any Slytherin he wanted and more besides had actually taken his boyfriend at face value. It was so ironic that it was funny, and Draco found he really didn't mind.

Oh they had lain on the blanket for a while kissing and petting with Draco taking the lead, as he seemed to do, and then the whole situation had shifted. Draco's hand slid down his bare chest as his skin tingled with the remembered touch of Harry's hand and he put his head back savouring the sensation. Kisses had followed the skilful fingers and before Draco had realised what was happening he had been half naked on the floor with Harry Potter on top of him making him groan out his pleasure.

Draco was a consummate player in the game of sex: it was a skill that his father had encouraged as much as politics and magic, but even with his experience he had been out played by his supposedly virginal companion tonight. Bashful, straightforward, Gryffindor, Harry Potter had orchestrated the seduction of overt, slippery, Slytherin, Draco Malfoy and it had been incredible.

As if he knew every secret of his boyfriend's body Harry had pulled reactions from Draco as if he was tuning a fine musical instrument. The captivated Slytherin had felt as if he was being worshipped by the other boy and he had surrendered to it more completely than he had ever given in to anything in his life.

Draco's hand drifted lower under the covers of his bed as he recalled Harry's feather light touch. The skilful Gryffindor had kissed every inch of his chest and then he had gone down on him with a passion that had taken Draco's breath away. His breath caught in his throat as he became hard at the memory. Harry's mouth encircling him, the delicate lips running over his body and the tongue playing at the tip of his erection; it was all so clear in Draco's mind. He had wrapped his fingers in Harry's unruly dark hair and bucked beneath his lover until his seed spilled into Harry's throat.

The Harry Potter of tonight had been a virtual stranger: Draco had never met the passionate, completely consuming man before; he had only ever known the slightly lost, occasionally angry boy. After he had made his captive scream his name Harry had flipped Draco on his front and taken him -- there was no other way to describe it. The dominant Gryffindor had opened him gently with lubricated fingers, caressed him like a delicate virgin and entered him as if they were part of the same creature that needed to be rejoined.

Draco moved against his bed sheets feeling the slight soreness and remembering Harry inside him. His lover's caress had been insistent and demanding but oh so

gentle at the same time. Draco had never had a partner so in tune with his body. It was almost as if they were made for each other. When Harry had come he had whispered Draco's name as if it was a sacred word and they had remained locked together for long seconds.

Draco remembered whimpering as Harry pulled out; not wanting the contact to end and they had lain in each other's arms for a long time. Then Harry, had looked him in the eye and declared his feelings in words that could not be mistaken.

"I love you, Draco Malfoy," Harry had said, "and nothing will ever change that."

That had been the strangest moment as cynical, world-weary Draco had believed his companion completely, and it had not frightened him. True love was a weakness, but then and now, as he lay in his bed the infatuated youth did not care.

"You are mine," Harry had told him with a certainty in his voice that at one time would have sent the aloof Slytherin running, "make me yours."

With carefree abandon they had swapped roles then as if it was the most natural thing in the world and Draco had taken Harry the same way he had been taken. He remembered every second with crystal clear clarity and he turned his head into his pillow as a moan threatened to make it out of his throat at the passion the memory caused. His hand encircled his hard erection under the covers as he recalled the tightness of Harry surrounding him.

There had been nothing separating them, no protection spells, no crude Muggle devices and it had been the most exhilarating experience of Draco's life. Harry had surrendered to him completely as he had done to Harry and they had shared something so erotic and encompassing that it made Draco's head spin.

The Slytherin pushed the covers down his bed as he moved his hand up and down his erection lost in the recollection of Harry Potter. He should have been spent, curling on his side lost in dreams of sex, but as his mind slipped back to the meeting his body responded again. Draco remembered sliding in and out of his lover and his hand worked in time as he pushed his face further into the pillow to stifle the sounds of passion that filled his throat. He shuddered silently, his seed spilling on to his stomach as his memory and body reached climax at the same time.

It took Draco long minutes to come down from the sexual high and he lay looking at the canopy of his bed breathing hard. He had never been so consumed by a sexual encounter before and it took him time to return to reality. Moving silently he reached under his pillow and retrieved his wand from where it was hidden. With a whispered spell the physical signs of his exertions were gone and he was clean, but he lay there for a long time, awake.

Nearly seventeen years of Malfoy training down the toilet of the girl's loo: it should have been laughable or tragic, but it was neither. Draco knew without a doubt that Harry had claimed him and that he could never break that. Something deep inside him told him he had surrendered to a path that would never let him go. It was strange but somehow everything felt right with the world, and everything had never been right in Draco's universe before.

Chapter 5 Revelations

Harry had not felt well since the moment he had crawled out of bed that morning and it had only been getting worse since. The vague headache that had started behind his eyes at breakfast was now a sharp stabbing pain every few seconds and a sick feeling in his stomach that wanted to return the meagre amount of food he had been able to consume that morning, back from whence it had come. Even the wonderful memories of the previous evening with Draco could not distract him from his physical discomfort. Harry was reminded of the incident a week and a half ago and if he had been sitting in anyone's class but Snape's he would have asked to be excused. As it was, the ailing Gryffindor was just praying for the lesson to end. Harry had already made up his mind that he was not going to make it to his next class, and all he had to do was hang on.

Today's work was a theory lesson not a practical which was a blessing at least, but Harry had given up taking notes about half way through. Ron was scribbling away so frantically next to him that his friend had not noticed his lab partner's predicament. Harry was staring fixedly at the partially filled page of parchment praying for deliverance when his vision suddenly went negative. It was as if the whole world was leaping up to swallow him; everything was too loud and bright silvers, golds and bronzes, and Harry felt awash with emotions that seemed to have come from nowhere. The pain in his head increased to the point where he heard himself whimper.

The next thing he knew there was a dark shape looming over him and it was like an icy barrier standing less than a foot away. It was a strange relief in the turmoil that Harry's world had so suddenly become, but as part of him appreciated Snape's cool presence the rest of him knew he was in trouble.

"Is there something you wish to share with the rest of the class, Potter?" his most adversarial professor's tone was almost conversational, but there was the familiar underlying sneer.

Harry would have replied if he'd been able to, but he could barely process the fact that someone was talking to him, let alone formulate a reply. Snape's words were distorted and far too loud. It was like someone shouting in his ear but with sounds that had been bounced through a long cave system.

"Mr Potter," Snape said slowly when Harry did not reply, "look at me when I am speaking to you."

His untidy handwriting on the page was moving in his vision and every time he glanced away from the almost blank sheet Harry felt overloaded. It took an extraordinary effort for him to drag his eyes away from the desk and look up. Snape's customary sneer was in place and it jumped out at Harry with metallic tinges: it was like watching a TV where the signal was being passed through a scrambler.

Harry had hoped that he didn't look as bad as he felt, but Snape's expression changed the moment he saw his face and it shocked the young wizard to actually see concern on the potions master's features.

"Are you unwell, Potter?" Snape asked in a much more gentle tone.

The pain in his head caused Harry to wince and although the professor's words were spoken in a moderate tone they tore through the young man's senses like a knife. It was too much and Harry could feel his mind trying to shut it out and

failing. He tried to tell Snape what was happening, but the only thing that came out of his mouth was a quiet whimper. Harry felt his connection to the world slipping out of his control and he began to slide sideways. Snape reached out to steady him and as the professor's hand touched his arm Harry couldn't help himself he screamed.

It was like knives being stabbed into his body as the simple touch sent pain shooting through every nerve. Harry felt as if his whole body was rejecting the contact and he couldn't take it anymore. The scream slowly dying in his throat Harry let the world fade away into blissful darkness.

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When Potter screamed Snape snatched his hand away, watching helplessly as the boy slid off his chair and onto the floor. At first when he had realised the wretched golden boy had not been paying attention he had been annoyed, but the moment he had seen the child's face Snape had known something was very wrong. Potter may have been as annoying as his father, but the boy was definitely ill. It was Granger speeding out of her seat and Weasley leaning off his stool that snapped the professor back into action.

"Miss Granger, Mr Weasley, stay where you are," Snape instructed sharply, bringing the girl to a halt and freezing the idiotic Weasley in place.

"But, Professor," the worry was written all over the know-it-all Muggleborn witch and Snape could tell she was caught between obeying him and going to her friend.

"If you touch him you may injure him," he said shortly, knowing the girl had enough sense to believe him and Weasley would not go against his girlfriend.

A murmur went round the room and several chairs scrapped on the floor as the pupils attempted to see what was going on. As the children moved closer Snape saw Potter's body twitch in response. He was not sure what was wrong with the boy, but he did know he had to do something about it immediately.

"I want every pupil in the hallway in the next thirty seconds," Snape said shortly, falling back into his normal tone, "and anyone who comes within five feet of Potter on their way out loses fifty house points. Is that understood?"

To their credit the class did exactly as they were told straight away.

"Miss Granger," he said evenly as the girl hovered, "run to the hospital wing and tell Madame Pomfrey I will be bringing Potter in. Instruct her to prepare one of the isolation rooms."

The girl nodded and pulled herself together, disappearing quickly. Then Snape pulled out his wand and cast two spells: the first put wards around the shivering boy and the second levitated him off the stone floor. Planning out the quickest route to the hospital wing in his head, Snape moved towards the door.

Madame Pomfrey had instructed Snape to wait and although it irked him to be ordered around by the school nurse he had done what he was asked. It did not shock him in the least when Dumbledore appeared outside Potter's room in the hospital wing. When the blasted boy was ill the headmaster always seemed to be in attendance, however, this time Dumbledore appeared more grave than usual. Over his six and a quarter years at Hogwarts Harry Potter seemed to have spent

more time in the hospital wing than the rest of the student body combined, but this time the headmaster did not appear as calm as usual. Madame Pomfrey had come out of the heavily warded room only a few minutes before and Snape assumed she had spoken to Albus.

"We have a problem," the headmaster said evenly. "I have called a meeting for the house heads in one hour."

Snape was very surprised, but he nodded anyway: this was a lot more serious than he had thought.

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Minerva McGonagall did not know what the meeting was to be about, but she had heard the news about Harry Potter. She hoped fervently that the boy would recover quickly and this was not the beginning of an attack or an epidemic. Calling together the house heads in the middle of the day was not something that the headmaster would do lightly.

"Thank you all for coming," Albus greeted evenly. "I am sorry to have to disrupt your lessons but this matter is rather urgent."

"I assume Potter is in the middle of something disastrous, again," Snape's tone was dismissive, but the fact that he had made a comment at all told Minerva that the potions master was actually worried.

This fact surprised her since the head of Slytherin clearly loathed Harry with a passion that shocked most.

"What is wrong with young Mr Potter?" she put her own question in.

"That, my friends, is the centre of our problem," the headmaster told then evenly; "according to Madame Pomfrey there is nothing exactly wrong with Harry yet, however, his condition does require our immediate attention or it could progress into a situation which will cause a serious threat to his continuing health."

Now Minerva was very confused, but she waited for Albus to go on, knowing that the explanation would be forthcoming.

"It appears that Harry is more unusual that even we gave him credit for," the headmaster continued. "He is a Hecatemus."

"There is no such thing," the shocked witch said at almost the same time Professor Snape expressed the same opinion.

"Hecatemae are all female," Minerva allowed the head of Slytherin to finish their objection.

Albus nodded his head slowly.

"And the last known Hecatema died seventy five years ago," the headmaster said evenly in his usual calm tone. "There is Hecatema blood in the Potter line: Harry's great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandmother to be precise, but how it came to be active in a male descendant is a mystery. However, it does not change the fact that this has occurred."

"You mean," Minerva said slowly realising what Albus was saying, "Harry has ... and he is trying to ... oh my."

The head of Gryffindor found it difficult to voice the conclusions to which she was coming. Harry had been under her care for over six years and never in a million years had Minerva expected to be having such a conversation about the somewhat reserved young man.

"Yes," the headmaster said evenly, "we may assume Harry is no longer, shall we say, inexperienced, and he is attempting to bond with his chosen mate."

Snape exploded from his chair as if furious about the whole situation. Minerva was not sure if he was angry because the situation was so unprecedented or that Harry Potter was at the centre of it all. One could never tell when it came to Severus Snape and James Potter's son.

"This is impossible," he said firmly. "Hecatema do not just happen. There should have been signs; the child should have been prepared since birth for this."

There was just a touch of anxiety in the man's voice and Minerva could not understand why. She wondered briefly if he knew something but dismissed the idea as ridiculous: the only thing the head of Slytherin knew about Harry was how to make him lose house points.

"Severus," Albus said calmly, "I am aware of what should have been apparent and what should have been done, but it is far too late to worry about these things now. Male children are not tested for Hecatemae abilities, an oversight which must be corrected from now on. The task before us is to make sure we do not lose Harry Potter because of this mistake."

Snape began to pace and Minerva did not blame him; this situation was unprecedented and it turned a great deal of known magical law on its head. Hecatemae were rare, only one or two a generation and they were always female. A family with history of these elemental witches in their lineage always tested female children at birth for any indications of these traits and if they were found the child was prepared for their role in life from the moment they were capable of understanding.

"We need to find the girl he slept with," Minerva pointed out, refusing to consider the consequences of the situation until a solution had been found.

The headmaster nodded.

"That is why I have called you all here," Albus said steadily. "Are any of you aware of a connection between Mr Potter and anyone in your houses?"

"He was involved with Cho Chang for a while in the fifth year," Minerva provided the information she knew, "and I believe he had a short relationship with a Ravenclaw last year, but those are the only two of which I am aware."

She looked to the head of Ravenclaw and the Charms Professor nodded.

"Briony Michello," the house head provided calmly, "but she was a seventh year and hence is no longer part of the equation."

"What about the Granger girl?" Professor Sprout offered hopefully.

The expression on Snape's face would have made Minerva smile if the situation had not been so serious. Severus did not appear impressed with the head of Hufflepuff's observation skills.

"Granger is involved with Weasley," the head of Slytherin said pointedly; "she and Potter have never been more than friends."

It did not surprise Minerva to find that Snape was aware of the connections between the three pupils; he had used the knowledge often enough to provoke them.

"Then we have no obvious candidates," Albus said as if it was exactly what he had suspected. "We cannot simply ask the school: Harry is far too vulnerable to allow this secret into the open. One correctly aimed spell, even through the wards, could kill him in his current condition. We must find his chosen mate and we must do so discretely. It is most likely that the poor child is completely confused and will start to feel the pull towards Harry very soon."

"Miss Granger and Mr Weasley may have more information," Minerva observed evenly.

"An excellent point," the headmaster replied and the head of Gryffindor was in no doubt that Albus had planned to bring the two seventh years into the plan anyway. "If Harry is to come out of this intact he will need the support of his friends. They should be told everything."

"And if that fails to solve the situation?" Snape's tone was cool but also calm.

"Madame Pomfrey suggested the ruse of a contagious disease," the headmaster said simply, "and we will move through the school discretely examining Harry's associates until we find the boy's soul mate."

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Hermione was sitting there with her mouth open in shock and Ron was just confused. There was something wrong with Harry, that much Ron had followed and it involved sex, which, coming from the headmaster's mouth, had been enough to shut down any other thought processes in the stunned Gryffindor's mind.

"I'm sorry, Professor Dumbledore," Ron said slowly, "but what is a Hecatemus?"

"A Hecatema is a witch," Hermione offered the explanation quickly and Ron had the distinct impression she needed to speak so her thoughts didn't stall like his, "who has the ability to sense the world in a totally different way to normal witches and wizards. They can see magic and they can feel the emotions of others as well as other natural forces. They're connected to everything in a far more direct way than most of us. Their powers don't come out until they find their soul mate and bond with them because they need a ground or their powers will drive them mad. Hecatemus is the male conjugation. How can Harry be a Hecatemus, they don't exist?"

The explanation did help Ron to understand, but he still could not quite believe it, and the way Hermione's tone was a little strangled at the end told him that she was in a similar position.

"Professor Snape expressed a comparable opinion. I am aware of how strange this situation must be for you," the headmaster said with an understanding smile, "it was not easy for those members of staff who are involved either, but I can assure you, Harry is a Hecatemus and he is attempting to bond with someone. Do either of you know who?"

Ron shook his head straight away, as far as he knew Harry hadn't been seeing anyone since Briony. The still somewhat bemused Gryffindor turned to look at Hermione and realised that she had not been so fast to deny knowledge.

"I don't know who," his girlfriend said slowly, "but Harry has been sneaking off to meet someone."

"How do you ..." Ron felt a little betrayed that he was not privy to this information, but Hermione stopped him with a look.

Of course there were more important things to worry about now.

"I can't be certain," she continued hesitantly, "but I don't think he thought we'd approve. When I cornered him he told me he was in love, but he wouldn't tell me who with."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at the news and Ron just goggled, because he was completely at a loss as to how to react.

"He said something was coming," the bewildered youth said as he tried to figure out how he hadn't realised what was going on with Harry. "He told us at the beginning of term."

"From what I understand of Hecatemae," the headmaster said in a gentle tone, as if he realised the quandary Ron found himself in, "when the time is right to join with their soul mate they sense the truth. If Harry's unique position had been acknowledged when he was an infant he would have been prepared to recognise the signs. It appears, however, that nature has succeeded even where the wizarding community has failed. It remains to us to find the individual Harry has chosen, discretely and quickly."

Ron appreciated Dumbledore's unwavering serenity, but he couldn't help feeling that he had failed his best friend somehow. Why hadn't Harry told him what was going on? What had been so difficult that it prevented Harry from talking to his housemates?

"It's not a Gryffindor," Hermione said firmly and Ron turned to look at her and saw his girlfriend's puzzle solving face in place. "The way Harry was acting I'd guess that either he was poaching someone else's girlfriend, or," she paused, "or he's in love with a Slytherin."

The fact that she'd even suggested such a thing sent Ron's thought's reeling: it was just not possible. Pinching someone else's girl was one thing, although not something he could actually imagine his friend doing, but a Slytherin? Harry would never in a million years go for one of those snakes.

"He wouldn't do either of those," Ron tried to refute his girlfriend's logic.

"Ron," Hermione said and took hold of his hand gently, "Harry was being driven by instincts. He didn't get to choose who he fell in love with: it's all about

compatibility. What we have to do is find out who he's started to bond with and then support him no matter what."

She had him caught with her eyes and for a second Ron didn't know if he could live up to the expectations he saw there, but slowly he nodded. Harry was his best friend and this time whatever Harry needed he was going to get.

"How can we help, Professor?" Ron asked firmly.

"Since it appears only Harry knows who his soul mate is," Dumbledore said calmly, "we have no choice but to investigate the school population. There are plans to facilitate this activity, which you do not need to worry about, but I would ask that you both remain vigilant. Harry and his soul mate have instigated their bond and although Harry succumbed to the changes in his body first his chosen mate will feel drawn to him soon. If either of you see anything that may indicate one of your fellow students is falling under Harry's influence please contact myself or one of the house heads. It is of the utmost importance that this remain secret or Harry will be placed in severe jeopardy."

Ron nodded immediately: for once he was not about to argue about anything. His best friend's life was in danger and a Gryffindor never let a friend down.

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When Harry had collapsed in potions Draco had wanted to go to him more than anything in the world. Only years of Malfoy conditioning had stopped him blowing everything in those tense seconds. Since then things had gone from bad to worse. It was like Harry was inside Draco's head. He could faintly feel the other boy's pain and Draco was almost consumed by the need to seek him out. He had lost five house points in his afternoon lessons for not concentrating and he had snapped at just about every member of his house until they'd stopped talking to him. He couldn't think and he could barely keep himself in his dorm. Harry Potter was calling to him and Draco had very little will left to refuse him.

Sleep had been a commodity that Draco had found difficult to come by since the Summer holidays and he had resorted to sleeping drafts. That was also the only reason he had managed to fall asleep the evening of Harry's collapse, but it didn't stop him waking up with a start in the small hours of the morning. His whole being screamed at him that something was wrong and he dragged himself out of bed quickly. The feeling of Harry in his head was stronger, but it was also more confused and desperate. Draco didn't even pause to pull on a robe, consider if anyone might see him, or throw on any slippers: his resistance was all but gone and he ran out the door towards the common room.

Silk pyjamas were not the best things for keeping out the cold, but Draco barely registered that the night air was chilly as he moved through the Slytherin common room at speed. Nothing made it into his thoughts except closing the distance between himself and Harry and he exited into the hall quickly. He was so wrapped up in that one aim that he didn't even notice Professor Snape until he literally ran into him. The last vestiges of self-control were all that prevented the frantic boy from pushing past his house master and running on.

"Mr Malfoy?" his head of house sounded genuinely surprised. "What are you doing down here at this time of night?"

Snape looked him up and down and raised an eyebrow.

"And were you planning to spend the rest of the year with Madame Pomfrey because of pneumonia?" the question was less scathing than it could have been, but Draco was in no state to appreciate it.

He knew he probably looked like a blithering lunatic but there was only one thing his mind could focus on, one thing his whole body was screaming at him and it is what came out of his mouth.

"Harry Potter," he said desperately, as if it explained everything.

Professor Snape stood there for a moment just staring at him. Draco almost lost it and stepped round his housemaster but he held himself in check by driving his fingernails into his palm. He could barely hold himself still as his soul demanded that he go to Harry. He was needed, he was loved, and he had to go. Quite suddenly Draco found a cloak draped around his shoulders and Snape's arm protectively with it.

"I will take you," the head of Slytherin said evenly. "In the state you are in you will undoubtedly try and run through walls, which will do neither you, nor that wretched Gryffindor any good."

Draco had to admit that he was not thinking straight; in fact he was not sure he could even remember the way to the hospital wing in his current state of mind. Following an instinct was all well and good, but Professor Snape was most likely right and Draco did not relish the thought of being found in the morning having bashed his brains out on something sold. The beleaguered Slytherin accepted the help gratefully and let himself be led down the dark corridors, his thoughts going blank.

"Severus, is that you?" Draco's mind clicked back in when he heard the headmaster's voice.

"Yes, Headmaster," the potions master replied and Draco hoped this would not be a long conversation.

He was close now, the enthralled boy could feel it, and he was fighting the desire to run the final distance.

"Who is that with you?" Dumbledore's question was light and curious.

The headmaster whispered a single word and the corridor filled with a dim glow. The old man did not look in the least surprised to see Draco and he smiled. Although he managed to prevent his body from following through Draco's mind pointed out the fastest route past the wizard, placing the headmaster cleanly in the 'not important' bracket in his brain.

"I believe we may have been looking in the wrong place," Professor Snape said evenly.

"Ah yes, I see you are correct," Dumbledore said cheerfully, as if meeting one of the teachers and a pupil in a hallway in the middle of the night was an everyday occurrence. "Thank you, Severus; I will take him from here. I will return your cloak once this is settled."

Draco saw his head of house nod smoothly out of the corner of his eye, and then it was Dumbledore's hands on his shoulders, not Snape's. The summons was so strong Draco was glad of the physical contact because it was all that was keeping

him from running blindly down the corridor, and he was pretty sure both of the older wizards were completely aware of this.

"Come, My Boy," the headmaster said gently, "he is this way."

Part of Draco's mind was whispering that this could not be happening, that this was all a trick, but most of him was not listening. Most of him was in fact informing his whole being that this was the event his entire life had been leading up to. Funny since only a few months previously he had thought his whole existence was about destroying Harry Potter's life rather than becoming part of it.

Madame Pomfrey looked shocked when Dumbledore steered Draco towards a large oak door beside which she was sitting, but she climbed to her feet quickly and pulled her keys out of her pocket. Part of Draco wanted to throw himself at the obstacle and he shifted from foot to foot as Madame Pomfrey unlocked the door. He was almost completely out of control and Draco wanted into the room with every fibre of his being; he could barely contain himself. When the door opened he literally ran past the school nurse and did not come to a halt until he for standing only a few feet from the bed in the room.

There was nothing that mattered, nothing but Harry, and Draco felt his mind saturated by his lover. This was what was meant to be.

Now he was here the need to just reach out and touch Harry was almost overwhelming, but for a moment Draco stood there and looked. Harry's face was pale and the scar was livid on his forehead, and in unconsciousness he did not look seventeen. When The Boy Who Lived was awake there was an adult set to his face and his green eyes showed all the evil he had seen, but relaxed as he was now he reminded Draco more of the eleven year-old he had first seen all those years ago.

Only half aware of what he was doing, Draco shrugged the cloak off his shoulders and slowly walked the last pace to the bed. Harry Potter, the hero of the wizarding world, looked so fragile in the big white bed and Draco knew there and then that he was the only thing that could bring back the life to the still figure. All the ideas that had been plaguing him all day seemed irrelevant and calmly he slowly climbed onto the bed on his knees. Kneeling beside Harry he reached out his hand. There was no doubt in Draco's mind, at that moment nothing would have stopped him, and he placed his fingers gently on Harry's arm.

Power flooded up his limb and with a sigh he felt his body succumb to it. His muscles gave way and he began to fall towards the mattress, but two pairs of hands caught him. The final thing Draco knew were those hands shifting him into a lying position beside Harry. With the last of his strength he curled close to his lover and let his mind float away.

Chapter 6 The Room

Harry opened his eyes on a very peculiar world: it was somewhat like the world he had left in Snape's classroom, but was more like the real world with the negative world overlaid on it. Objects were touched with metallic shades and there were weird patterns on things, but it felt more ordered and much more controlled. He stared at the ceiling for a while, watching an intricate spiral pulse across it in a vaguely hypnotising manner. It was only after a couple of minutes that he realised someone was lying next to him curled up on their side.

Slowly Harry turned his head and found himself looking at the sleeping face of Draco Malfoy and his lover's features were glowing gold. For a moment Harry thought he was dreaming and then he felt it, the presence in the back of his mind, the calm, reassuring essence of Draco.

He reached for his glasses slowly, wanting to see the world in proper focus. His hand found them on the bedside table and he pushed them onto his nose, relaxing back into the pillow. The logical part of Harry's thoughts informed him that this situation should bother him and that he should be calling for someone to tell him what was going on, but he just lay there. The rest of his mind did not want him to move and did not care that lying in a strange bed next to Draco should worry him: in fact most of his thoughts were taken up with a feeling of content rightness. In his entire life Harry had never really been content: he had been happy at times throughout his life at Hogwarts, but he had never felt like he felt now. He was here, Draco was here, and that was all that mattered.

Harry was so caught up in this feeling that he lay there for a good ten minutes just watching, before his body managed to inform his mind that there were some pressing matters to attend to involving his bladder. Reluctantly he dragged his eyes away from Draco and looked around the room. There were two doors; one of which was covered in patterns and one which was not, a wardrobe, a strange looking alcove and a table that he could see, but no windows and nothing that would aid him in his need. Carefully he climbed out of bed and on instinct headed towards the door without the pattern. It opened towards him and he was very thankful to see a bathroom.

Without waiting to consider why he was in a room with a private bathroom, Harry slipped inside and relieved himself. Then, and only then, did anything but his physical requirements make it into his mind and he looked around. As he washed his hands he had to admire the gold taps and marble surround to the perfectly white porcelain sink. In fact the whole room was done out in gold, white and marble, which was nice because it didn't clash with the new world Harry could see over top of it, and it was very impressive. It also contained all of his toiletries as well as some he didn't recognise, which he assumed were Draco's. He was examining an item that he could not even begin to comprehend when he felt something and on instinct turned. Green eyes met grey and just looked for a moment.

"We have a bathroom?" Draco said in a somewhat surprised tone.

"The other door is locked and charmed," Harry said without thinking, "we need one."

It then occurred to him that he was not sure how he knew that. The information had just come out of his mouth with no conscious thought. Draco just shrugged and Harry decided that his boyfriend felt as if he was accepting everything calmly. Having taken this in, Harry was once again reminded that knowing what

someone was feeling was not normal. His lover padded past him and proceeded to do exactly what Harry had done previously without the slightest hint of bashfulness. Now that Draco was awake, the contentment wasn't quite enough to put off the questions that began flying in his brain.

"You're in my head," Harry found himself saying.

Draco turned from where he was cleaning his hands and smiled slightly.

"And you're in mine," he said, as if this made perfect sense to him.

Harry could not deny that it felt as if this was a completely correct state of affairs. There was confusion in Draco, Harry could also feel that, and he didn't think his companion knew what was going on any more than he did, but at least neither of them was panicking about it.

"And I can see these weird shapes everywhere," Harry admitted, looking around the room, "and everything looks vaguely metallic."

Now Draco stopped what he was doing and turned to face Harry completely.

"Now that's not happening to me," his lover admitted. "Everything looks perfectly normal from over here. What exactly can you see?"

On instinct Harry did not try and describe what he was looking at; he took a mental picture and projected it at companion. His lover's eyes opened slightly in surprise, but Draco's face spread in a smile of something close to pleasure.

"That was," he said slowly, obviously trying to find the right word, "incredible. I saw what you saw and not like some stupid spell."

Harry suddenly saw an image of himself in his mind's eye and he blinked in shock. The feeling of rightness did not go away, in fact it intensified, and Harry found himself grinning at Draco. He sobered after a couple of seconds as his always over active thoughts began asking questions again.

"Draco," he said slowly, "why is this not worrying us? This is not normal."

His lover looked thoughtful for a moment and finally shrugged again.

"I have no idea," Draco said eventually, "but there's a letter on the table out there addressed to both of us so that might give us an idea."

With that the two young men headed back into the other room. By mutual consent Draco picked up the letter and they both walked back to the bed, sitting on it side by side. The seal on the letter was Dumbledore's and it opened as the Draco pulled at it. At that point the parchment gained a life of its own and for a second Harry was afraid that it was going to be similar to a howler.

"My dear Harry and Draco," Dumbledore's calm tones emanated from the letter, "I took the liberty of charming this letter to avoid the dreariness of having to read my hand writing. I am sure your current situation comes to both of you as somewhat of a surprise. Believe me when I say it has shocked the few members of staff who know the truth more than you could imagine. By all accounts when you read this you will have been asleep for a little over one and a half days and I am sorry there is no one there to talk to you in person, but this would be most uncomfortable for Harry."

This startled the subject of the headmaster's words and he looked away from the letter at Draco, which caused it to suspend its speech: Harry was beginning to feel that this was probably his fault. He turned back to the letter.

"Harry, My Boy, I have to admit that even I did not see this one coming," the headmaster's slightly amused voice continued. "You are a most extraordinary young man and far more extraordinary than anyone could foresee. You are in fact what is known as a Hecatemus."

The spike of surprise that came from Draco caused Harry to look at his companion again and the letter to stop talking.

"I take it you know what that is?" Harry said quietly.

Draco nodded.

"Sort of," his lover admitted, "let it continue."

Harry nodded and returned his attention to the charmed parchment.

"I am sure you are wondering what that is," the voice went on and Harry could imagine Dumbledore's knowing smile, "and I shall not keep you waiting. You are in point of fact an elemental wizard connected to the energies which run through our world in a far more direct way than the rest of wizardkind. This is a role for which you should have been prepared from birth, but please forgive our ignorance. As Draco can most likely tell you, there have only ever been, up to this point, Hecatema: elemental witches, so you were never tested."

The letter paused as Harry felt his brain go into overload: it seemed to realise he needed time to assimilate the information. The newly proclaimed Hecatemus looked around at the room while trying to sort out his thoughts and Draco placed a hand on his arm in an unconscious gesture of support. It occurred to Harry that the designs he could see on the walls and much of the furniture were magic.

"Draco, I am sure you have realised what this information makes you," the letter continued when Harry finally returned his focus to it, "please forgive me if I explain to Harry. The world around you undoubtedly looks somewhat different from that which you are used to, My Boy. This is because you can sense the energies which sustain our world. The most obvious of these will be magic and you may see emotion as well from time to time, but you will most likely just feel that unless it is very strong. Do not fear, in time you will learn to construct mental barriers to return your world to normal. That is where Draco comes in: he is your soul mate."

Harry stopped paying attention again and turned to look at his lover. Something told him that the fact he had just heard should have at least caused him to question, but as Draco gazed back at him he knew it was no more than the truth.

"The information you are capable of understanding is far too much for one mind, Harry," Dumbledore's parchment continued to explain. "You chose Draco to stabilise you, so that you are part of each other. Or rather I should say nature chose you both; from what I understand there is no conscious choice involved. Draco, your instincts are your best guide, you understand how to help Harry even if you do no know you know. There is much more I could tell you, but I think now is not the time and it is better if you find some things out yourselves."

Harry and Draco shared a look: it was just like Dumbledore to give most of the information but expect them to work out the rest themselves.

"The wall to the left of your bed is a speaking wall which will allow communication to the outside that will not affect Harry's new awareness," the headmaster's letter told them after a few moments. "Touch the blue stone to activate it and you will be able to talk to whoever is on the other side. It will also record messages if there is no one with which to converse. If there is an emergency press the blue stone three times and an alarm will alert Madame Pomfrey. The alcove is a small summoning chamber; if you need anything simply ask it nicely and it will retrieve it for you. I am sure you have already found the bathroom. The door to the outside is locked and no one will be allowed in or out until such time as Harry is able to shield himself at least partially. This is to prevent any more incidents similar to the one in Professor Snape's lesson. Rest assured that the majority of the school are unaware of the true nature of your incapacitation; they believe you both contracted a rare form of Draconigena Mumps from infected dragon scales. Those who have been made aware of the situation are myself, Madame Pomfrey, Professors Snape, McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout, Miss Granger and Mr Weasley. Please do not strain yourselves, you have both been through quite a transformation and there is plenty of time. Ah yes, and one more thing, make sure that you eat, both of you will require a great deal of energy from now on."

Then the letter refolded itself and gently floated down onto the bed. The two young men sat side by side in silence for a while and Harry tried to come to terms with what he had just heard. It wasn't that he didn't believe it, in fact he had no doubts it was true, but he just couldn't understand it all. Part of him was absolutely furious at the universe for throwing yet another bludger in his direction, but the rest of him was singing for joy that this was what his whole life had been leading up to. It was difficult to focus on how different this made him, yet again, when he was sitting next to Draco feeling like he had found the part of himself that had always been missing. He glanced at his soul mate and decided that the whole situation was totally insane.

"I agree," Draco said and looked at him, "but the whole world's pretty insane at the moment."

Harry blinked at his lover and it took a moment for it to dawn on him what had happened.

[You heard me,] he thought the words and concentrated on Draco.

His quick witted boyfriend cottoned on immediately.

[Yes,] Draco responded and the word filtered into Harry's head.

This caused another smile to break out on Harry's face, which rather outdid the worry that had begun to creep into his mind.

"Okay, how do I fret about a situation when I keep feeling deliriously happy?" he asked out loud this time.

"It is rather difficult," Draco admitted, smiling himself, "maybe the euphoria will wear off eventually. In the mean time, are you hungry?"

Harry's stomach gave his answer for him with a loud growl.

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The summoning alcove provided them with a veritable feast and for a while the two young men ate and chatted about insignificant things, avoiding the whole subject of their current situation. Harry let himself live in the moment for once and ignored his brooding side, allowing the contentment he felt to consume him. He and Draco explored the room together: they opened the cupboard and found a selection of their clothes hung up as well as more of their things, including wands; then they investigated the bathroom more thoroughly; and finally they went over every inch of their current home making sure there were no hidden surprises.

The only thing they did not touch was the speaking wall, leaving it until last. Finally they had nosed into everything and Draco walked up to the wall that, as far as Harry was concerned, was bright gold.

"Shall we let them know we're alive?" his lover asked with a sigh.

"Uh-huh," Harry replied, but he felt as reluctant as Draco.

Talking to those outside would let the world in and with that came questions and responsibilities. Part of Harry did not want to give up his simple happiness just yet. Being a responsible Gryffindor he felt it his duty to put those waiting out of their suspense, but he was rather enjoying the time alone with Draco. For a while Harry was decided on doing the right thing and then, as his soul mate reached for the activation stone, the indecisive wizard moved and stopped him.

"Changed my mind," Harry said, giving in to what he had long ago dubbed his inner Slytherin, "there's something else I want to do first."

Draco looked and felt faintly surprised, but his expression turned to one of a knowing smile as Harry stepped towards him so they were nose to nose.

[And what would that be then?] His boyfriend asked, affecting an angelically innocent expression.

[Well I could give you a detailed description,] Harry replied, letting his eyes run all over Draco's face, [but I thought I'd show you instead.]

There was something about the blond wizard that was simply beautiful. To Harry his soul mate's pale skin was still tinged with deep gold and it enhanced the ethereal quality of Draco's fine bones and platinum hair rather than hiding it. At that moment Harry was sure his lover was the most incredible creature he had ever seen and he wanted to touch that beauty.

Their previous encounter had been surreptitious, stolen hours in the disused girl toilets while Nearly Headless Nick kept Moaning Myrtle busy as a favour to Harry. It had been undoubtedly one of the crowning moments of his young life, but he wanted to make love to Draco without worrying that they'd be interrupted by a ghost. Harry wanted to touch every part of his soul mate and make his lover shudder with ecstasy, and he wanted to do it now.

Draco leant back on the wall as Harry pushed against him, bringing up one hand and running it down the side of his soul mate's face. The touch made Draco smile and Harry wanted to kiss the gently curving lips -- so he did. The moment their lips joined he felt his awareness change as his mind moved to join with his lover's. Harry could feel Draco like he was almost part of him and he sensed his soul mate's arousal. The enrapt young man took his time tasting the faint

cinnamon flavour let over from the food they had recently consumed and feeling the soft skin yield to his mouth.

On impulse Harry nipped at Draco's bottom lip and his lover partially opened his mouth in response. Harry pushed his tongue through the waiting opening, running his hand behind Draco's head at the same time to bring them closer together. In response his soul mate wound his arms around Harry's body, snaking his hands under the Hecatemus' pyjama top. Harry shivered at the touch, revelling in the feeling of being so close to the man he loved. The kiss deepened as he wound his fingers in his lover's hair and their tongues explored each other's mouths.

[Stop,] Draco's voice suddenly said in his mind and Harry drew back startled and breathless.

In his confusion he searched his lover's face and feelings for any sign of what he had done wrong, but he found nothing. Only as a half smile started playing at the corners of Draco's mouth again did Harry stop panicking.

"I want to be clean first," Draco said in a whisper, running a finger over Harry's moist lips. "No point in having a bath that big unless you plan to use it."

Then Draco took his lover's hand and Harry found himself being led towards the bathroom. It was an unexpected turn around and the somewhat bemused young man found himself wondering how he had so suddenly lost control: from seducer to follower.

[Get used to it,] Draco said with a small mental laugh, [a Gryffindor will never be able to keep up with a Slytherin.]

[The Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin,] Harry replied, deciding that he was willing to play the game, [I'm only a Gryffindor because I asked it not to.]

His companion stopped walking at that revelation and looked at Harry as if he was a completely different person. It was Harry's turn to laugh and he pulled Draco close again, kissing the tip of his nose.

"You're stunning when you're shocked: I must remember to surprise you more often," Harry said, looking into his lover's grey eyes. "Now you get to have your bath, but I have decided it's my job to make sure every inch of you is clean."

"Every inch?" Draco said, raising an eyebrow playfully,

"Down to the last sixteenth," Harry promised as he ran his hand over his lover's silk clad behind.

It took the pair around five minutes to run the bath and shed their clothes and then another five minutes to actually climb into the water since Harry refused to let go of Draco. Eventually the Slytherin broke away with a laugh and climbed into the tub, Harry watched him with admiration. Draco's naked frame held no teenage awkwardness and he moved with fluid grace and confidence even without clothes. His skin was pale and perfect and he was lithe and muscled from his Quidditch training.

[You are beautiful,] Harry said silently, not trusting his voice to actually work.

The epitome of unearthly beauty looked up as he slid into the hot water and Harry felt his lover's eyes rake over his body.

[And you are intoxicating,] Draco told him with a barely controlled need in his tone.

Harry had never been particularly aware of his body: it served him as a tool and he had not really considered much beyond that, but under Draco's gaze he felt desired. In front of his lover's eyes he was not The Boy Who Lived, nor was he a gawky seventeen year old; he was simply loved. When Draco smiled at him Harry moved and climbed into the bath behind his lover. The already half submerged youth shifted so that Harry could sit behind him and when he was comfortably resting against the side of the large tub he pulled Draco between his legs so his soul mate was leaning against him.

The water was pleasantly hot against his skin and Draco fitted comfortably against his chest and for a while they just lay there enjoying the heat. It was almost perfect and Harry was content; that was until he looked down and his eyes fell on his lover's neck. Draco had his head laying to the side on Harry's shoulder which revealed a long pale section of skin and Harry did the only sensible thing, he kissed it. A smile played across his companion's face as Draco closed his eyes and Harry could feel the pleasure running through his lover. He then set about making sure the feeling increased by continuing his ministrations. When Draco actually groaned Harry allowed himself a small smile of triumph.

Once he was satisfied he knew every millimetre of exposed neck Harry moved on. The water came to half way up Draco's chest as he relaxed in his soul mate's arms, and the pale youth's skin was completely smooth and hairless. Harry ran his hand over the damp surface and then reached over to pick up the sponge that was lying on the edge of the bath. It was of course a natural sponge and nothing like the off pink things the Dursleys always had in their bathroom. The water was full of scent and bubbles so Harry just soaked the sponge and then tenderly pushed it against Draco's skin, allowing the perfumed liquid to run over his lover's body.

Harry could already feel the potions in the water working on his own skin, cleaning and soothing wherever they touched and he continued to gently sponge off his soul mate's chest in a leisurely fashion. As with most things in the wizarding world, taking a bath was nowhere near as labour intensive as the Muggle system, and the two young men could have just lain there and let the water do its work. As it was Harry was enjoying himself, but he discarded the sponge as soon as he thought Draco was wet enough and went back to using his hands. The hard muscles of his lover's torso twitched under his fingers as the exploring digits found sensitive skin. When Harry ran his nails gently over Draco's nipples and down his sides the blond youth almost purred.

Every touch sent little jolts of pleasure through his soul mate that Harry could feel and he used them to guide him. A light trace here, a more forceful stoke there: Harry ran his hands over every part of his lover's torso, neck and arms, even the tops of his legs. Draco just lay there making small noises of pleasure and moving slightly to allow Harry access to anything he wanted. Under the pale, cold, Malfoy exterior Draco was a well of passion and Harry sensed the arousal building in him until it was an ache. Only when it felt like Draco was about to explode out of his stillness did the tormentor run his fingers over the inside of his lover's thigh and continue the stoking motion over Draco's hard shaft. The air left his lover's chest in an explosive moan at Harry's touch and Draco pulsed under the Hecatemus' hand. The stabs of complete ecstasy running through his soul

mate were enough to make Harry moan as well.

Harry's own erection throbbed with desire where he was pressed up against the small of Draco's back and he buried his head in his lover's neck to stifle a second moan. He tried to concentrate on Draco as he moved his hand smoothly up over the blond youth's shaft and then down, lightly stroking over his lover's balls, but each sensation in Draco caused a mirror in him. It was a strange mixture of pleasuring his soul mate and pleasuring himself and as Harry continued it became more difficult to tell the difference.

He kissed and nipped at Draco's neck as his hands moved over his lover's body and the blond youth reached back, interlacing his fingers in Harry's hair as the Gryffindor bent forward. It barely mattered who was touching who anymore and Harry could only concentrate on building the pressure in both of them. Draco groaned, Harry groaned: it was all part of the sensation, heightening the sexual experience for both of them. Under Harry's searching fingers his soul mate's body sang and they climbed closer and closer to orgasm together.

When it came, their climax -- there was no other way of describing it, it did not happen to each of them separately it was a joined experience -- was mind blowing. By then Harry was barely aware of which body was his own and he had no idea which of them had reached the edge first, or if they'd done so at the same time: it didn't matter. All that he knew was that Draco shuddered against him moaning his name and Harry surrendered all control of his own muscles as he clung to his lover and matching shivers ran through him. His face was buried in his soul mate's neck and he couldn't help himself: he bit down quite hard.

When Harry finally regained enough brainpower to figure out which way was up and which body parts belonged to him, Draco was lying completely limp in his arms. His lover's eyes were closed and Draco's expression was one of pure pleasure. Harry could feel Draco's mind working, but he chose not to delve as his soul mate savoured the moment.

[I love you,] the words filtered into Harry's head.

[I love you too,] he replied, sated and moving to wrap his arms around his still companion.

[And that was ...] Draco's mental voice trailed off.

[Yes it was, wasn't it,] Harry agreed, not sure how to describe it either.

They lay there for another few seconds, savouring the post sex haze until finally Draco sat up. Harry's eyes couldn't help but fix on the red teeth marks on his lover's neck: he had not broken the skin, but it had been close. Draco fingered the patch lightly and then half turning smiled at his soul mate.

"You'll have to fix these later," he said, dropping his hand from the marks, "for now we need more water." And with that he reached for the plug.

It took only a minute or so to remove the dirty water and refill the bath, at which point they both relaxed back in the bubbles again. It was nice just to be still.

[Harry?] Draco's voice was quizzical.

[Yes?] the slightly sleepy young man replied.

[Before you chose me you were a virgin, right?] it was not quite the question Harry had been expecting but somehow from Draco it made sense.

[Yeah,] he replied.

There was a moment's pause.

[So if you had never done it before,] his lover voiced his confusion, [how come you are so good at sex? No one has ever touched me like you do.]

Part of Harry wanted to laugh, but the rest of him realised it was a serious question.

[Um,] he replied not quite sure of the answer himself, [when it comes to you I just seem to know what to do. I think it's all nature not nurture.]

His lover was silent for a while after that and Harry could feel Draco's thoughts ticking over.

[Fair enough,] his companion finally said thoughtfully, and reached for the sponge, [but you do realise I am going to have to experiment to see if it works the same the other way?]

Harry remained leaning against the side of the bath, a smile gracing his features: now he was quite happy for Draco to take over.

Chapter 7 Reality

The metallic hues and the patterns around the room were interesting for about the first six hours Harry was awake: then they became a little over powering. It was tiring having his brain stimulated by so much information and it was beginning to give him a headache.

After their bath they had somehow managed to dry each other off, although is had taken a long time since they were both easily distracted. Then they had returned to the bedroom where Draco has pounced on Harry like sex was the only thing on his mind and they had made love to each other as if the rest of the world didn't exist. After that they had cleaned up again, put on clean pyjamas, eaten some more, and then alerted the world that they were awake.

Madame Pomfrey's instructions had been simple: rest, relax, eat and don't do anything strenuous for at least another day. That was when they had discovered that the speaking wall recorded laughter. They had not enlightened the healer to the fact that the horse had already bolted on the last point.

They had talked for a while, but neither of them was ready to consider the full consequences of their position so it had just been chatter. Then Draco had used the summoning chamber to bring him a book he had been reading and Harry had retrieved the book on Quidditch tactics Ron had given him for his birthday. They had managed to sit quietly reading for about half an hour before Harry had noticed that Draco looked incredibly sexy in silk and some serious petting had resulted. It was quite honestly as if Harry was addicted to his soul mate and he could not get enough of him: Draco did not appear to be resisting at all.

They had been lying in each other's arms since, enjoying each other's bodies as they felt like it, indulging their impulses and Harry was happier than he had ever been. It was only as they were resting quietly that he began to notice the dull ache behind his eyes.

[It's beginning to hurt isn't it,] Draco said in his mind. [You need to shut it out.]

[I don't know how,] Harry admitted honestly.

[That's where I come in,] his lover said calmly and sat up beside him.

Harry went to sit up as well, but Draco placed a hand on his shoulder and stopped him.

[Just lay still,] his soul mate said with a small smile, [I'm working on instinct here so go with me okay.]

Harry nodded and couldn't help the grin when Draco pushed him onto his back and climbed on top of him.

[Relax,] Draco instructed looking down at his lover seriously.

[It's kind of difficult with you sitting there,] Harry said lightly as his eyes ran up and down the half undone pyjama top his companion was wearing.

[Behave,] Draco said with a slight smile, [we're here to cure your headache; remember?]

Harry's hands snaked up under the back of his lover's top as if they had a will of their own.

[You could just distract me,] he said unable to resist the urge to touch Draco.

His soul mate reached behind him under his clothes and took hold of Harry's hands bringing them round and pushing them down onto the bed on either side of his face.

[You have no self control, Potter,] Draco said with a knowing shake of his head.

[Not since I fell in love with you, anyway,] Harry replied, but did not try and free his hands.

[No sex until you've successfully blocked out the magic,] Draco said seriously, [now close your eyes.]

Harry tried to drag his mind away from sex for a few minutes, but being a Hecatemus was more difficult than most would have guess and it took effort to do as he was told. He could no longer see the magic in the room, but he could still sense it. Draco shifted above him and Harry felt his lover lay down flat so that the blond youth's head was on his chest. It took a great deal of effort not to flip straight back to the idea of Draco's naked body.

Their minds were already deeply connected, but Harry felt Draco's presence intensify even more and they were almost as closely connected as they had been during sex. There were still two of them, but they almost seemed to occupy the same space.

[Use me, Harry,] Draco's voice said in his mind, [I am between you and the world. I can take some of it away, but you need to block out the rest.]

Harry let his mind explore the feeling of his lover for a while, examining his mental presence in ways he had not realised were possible. Draco was blocking some of the power, Harry could feel it, and slowly he opened his eyes. The patterns on the ceiling were still there, but they were fainter almost ghostly. Taking the feeling of Draco, Harry pulled the sensation deep inside and tried to forge the same feeling within himself. It was quite difficult and he lost the idea several times before something flared inside him.

It was like flicking a switch, suddenly the lights went out and Harry was left blinking at the white ceiling in amazement. He heard himself laugh and Draco slowly sat up, his mind steady and constant inside Harry's. Harry looked into his lover's grey eyes with triumph, then a lock of Draco's hair slipped over his face, which Harry found adorable, and his concentration cracked. The light switch went on again and the room lit up with the forces in it.

[Not bad for a first try,] Draco said cheerfully, [we'll have you doing this in your sleep before you know it.]

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It was thirty six hours before Harry could keep his barriers up for more than a few minutes, at which point he could shield long enough that Madame Pomfrey requested that she be allowed to come in and make sure there were no physical side effects of the bonding.

They had been left pretty much alone except for a few brief conversations through the speaking wall and someone entering their sanctuary bothered both Harry and Draco. The Slytherin knew that he was experiencing a protective streak that he had never felt before and it was a little frightening. Suddenly finding himself placing someone else before his own interests without question was not something Draco was used to. The fact that he suspected he was willing to do anything to protect Harry was rather overpowering as well.

Contrary to what every Gryffindor except Harry, and a large percentage of the rest of the school thought, Draco had never been completely self-centred. He cared about his friends and his family, but there was no denying he was a Malfoy, and as such he had certain responsibilities, which included making sure he always ended up at the top of the heap.

When people accused Draco of being a self-centred git they failed to realise that in every action he took he considered many generations of family. That he had already betrayed said family and would quite happily kill any one of them that tried to touch a hair on Harry's head, had not escaped his notice. It was quite worrying to Draco's normally cold and collected mind to realise that if anyone so much as raised their voice to his soul mate just at the moment, they were likely to end up on the wrong side of Draco's wand.

Waiting for Madame Pomfrey to enter the room was not helping Draco's equilibrium, especially since Harry was a bundle of nerves. He was having to employ all his years of Malfoy training to retain a semblance of calm.

[If you need her out of here just say,] Draco told his lover firmly.

To his surprise, Draco saw a smile appear on Harry's face at that instruction and he felt the underlying amusement run through his soul mate. Draco was not amused at all by the situation and he failed to see the humour in what he had said.

[You against Madame Pomfrey,] his lover explained, obviously having picked up on Draco's confusion, [now that would be a confrontation to see. I'd want to be a mile away in a bunker, but it would be something to see.]

Draco felt the corners of his mouth quirk upwards without his conscious consent at the mental image Harry's words brought into his mind. On consideration he had to agree that 'formidable' was a description which went very well with the school healer and most would never cross her. He sobered quickly, however; he had meant what he said.

[Just remember, okay,] Draco said in the sternest tone he could manage, and Harry squeezed his hand in return before turning his green eyes back to the door.

They had exchanged messages on the speaking wall only a few minutes previously and Madame Pomfrey had informed them that she would be in shortly. Shortly was turning out to feel like an eternity as the two soul mates sat on the bed waiting nervously for the door to open. Patience had never been one of Draco's strongest virtues in such situations, but he kept himself calm for Harry's sake.

[I wish she'd just get this over with,] Harry broke the silence which had fallen in his mind.

[You'll be fine,] Draco reassured gently. [I'm not going to let go and Madame Pomfrey already said she can do everything she needs to do with a couple of spells.]

He had the feeling that his lover was going to reply, but before Harry had a chance the sound of a key in the lock drew both their attentions. They were locked in for their own safety and there were some pretty impressive locking charms on the door to prevent entry from anyone except the key holder. Draco was sure that at one time he would have felt like he was being caged, but just now it felt like a major protection was being taken away as the door unlocked.

The moment the oak barrier against the world moved, Harry tensed beside him and a shot of alarm went through the nervous Gryffindor. His lover's grip on Draco's hand was vice like and Harry moved to place another hand on his arm as well. Draco followed through on his instinctive reaction and opened his mind further, solidifying his presence in his lover's thoughts. In response Harry's touch became less of a death grip, but he was still so tense he was almost vibrating.

Draco could feel the pressure on his lover's mental barriers even though only a small part of the outside world was being allowed in and he did his best to make sure it was not too much for his soul mate. Madame Pomfrey did not open the door very far and she did not keep it open for long, stepping through and closing it behind her quickly. As soon as it shut, Draco felt the strain on Harry ease somewhat, but the presence of another magically gifted individual who was not part of the bond was causing his lover to expend more energy than he had ever had to before to maintain his equilibrium.

"Gentlemen," Madame Pomfrey greeted cordially, "shall we proceed as quickly as possible?"

The woman seemed to be as aware of the stress she was putting Harry under as Draco was and her quiet efficiency and acknowledgement of the situation went a long was to calming his annoyance at the intrusion, which had been building up in him since it was suggested. Giving her a nod Draco muted the glare he had been planning on giving the healer the moment she entered.

"Yes, please," he said evenly.

Draco's protective instincts were far too much in play to let him be pleasant, but he could at least be polite.

[Just breathe,] he told Harry silently, [let it all flow over you.]

Harry gave him a small thank you smile before the returning his attention to their visitor.

[I can do this,] Draco heard from his soul mate and he doubted that Harry knew he was broadcasting.

Madame Pomfrey walked towards them and came to a stop a few feet from the couple. The healer produced her wand calmly and looked over both of her patients. Draco steeled himself for whatever effect the woman's magic might have on Harry.

"There are two spells I need to cast," Madame Pomfrey explained efficiently; "one will check your general health; the other will examine your innate magic. Neither should cause you any discomfort."

Harry swallowed and put on an expression of calm that even impressed Draco, who had been the master of such things since he was a small child.

"We're ready," Draco said quietly, knowing that if his lover so much as opened his mouth the facade would crack.

"Mr Potter," the school healer turned her attention to Harry, "I will cast on you first."

Harry was definitely paler than usual and his fear was obvious in the tightness of his face, but Harry gave the tiniest of nods and Draco kept his gaze firmly fixed on him. Madame Pomfrey raised her hand, spoke the words of a spell which Draco vaguely recognised and flicked her wand. Harry gasped and shied away from the woman even before she had finished casting and Draco felt confusion and panic run through his soul mate. Harry's mental barriers shuddered and Draco knew he had to act before they crumbled and Harry was exposed.

Ignoring whatever Madame Pomfrey might be doing Draco stood and placed himself between Harry and the healer.

[Look at me,] he instructed firmly and took his lover's chin in his hand, forcing the struggling wizard to meet his eyes. [It's okay, you felt the magic; it can't hurt you. Relax. Concentrate on me, nothing else.]

Even as he spoke Draco could feel Harry adjusting. It was quite an amazing feeling as his soul mate's mind adapted to the new input and Draco was reminded that he was bonded to a quite remarkable individual.

"Sorry," Harry apologised, colouring with embarrassment as he regained his composure.

"There is nothing to be sorry for, Mr Potter," Madame Pomfrey replied before Draco could say almost exactly the same thing. "You are adjusting to a completely new way of interacting with your environment. Certain reactions are to be expected in such circumstances."

Draco turned and favoured the healer with a calm gaze. Part of him was screaming that she had just harmed his soul mate and that he should exact revenge, but the rest of him pointed out that Madame Pomfrey was only doing what she had to do and was concerned about the consequences. He considered all the facts for a moment and then he made a decision; with calm deliberation Draco smiled genuinely at the woman. With her words Madame Pomfrey had moved from neutral, possibly helpful, in his mind, to ally. For a second the healer appeared slightly surprised and then she returned the gesture with a smile of her own before moving her attention back to Harry.

"I'm sorry, Mr Potter," Madame Pomfrey said calmly, "but I must recast the charm, are you prepared?"

Draco couldn't help but be proud of his lover as Harry squared his shoulders, sat straighter on the bed and nodded.

"I know what to expect this time," the Gryffindor said in a voice that was almost calm.

Retaking his seat on the bed, Draco gave his soul mate all his support. Madame Pomfrey moved forward once more from where she had backed away. This time when she cast, Harry did not shy away, but Harry's grip on Draco was almost painful and Draco had to put a lot of effort into helping his lover keep his shields in place.

They had learned pretty quickly that once Harry was used to something his abilities improved rapidly, but new situations were a problem. Draco made a mental note of exactly what he could feel the magic doing to his lover's mental barriers so he could recreate the sensation later.

Madame Pomfrey cast her spells quickly on both of them and Draco mostly ignored her, concentrating on Harry, until she had finished and stood back once more. When he looked at the healer she was frowning slightly: never a good sign when it came to Madame Pomfrey.

"Is something wrong?" Harry asked, sounding worried.

"Both of your magic is fine," the woman said, clearly displeased with something, "but I believe I instructed you to eat."

Harry looked at Draco and he looked back; they had been stuffing themselves whenever they felt like it since the moment they woke up.

"We have been eating," Draco replied for both of them. "I've eaten more in the past two days than I ate in the last week and Harry's been putting away even more."

Madame Pomfrey frowned, but did not look quite so annoyed with either of them at the explanation. At least she didn't accuse Draco of lying; he wouldn't have handled that very well.

"You are both healthy enough," the healer said evenly, "but your energy levels are down. Whatever you are eating now I suggest you increase it by at least one half. Make sure you choose high energy foods: lots of carbohydrates, Gentlemen."

Draco found himself nodding obediently before he even thought about it and almost smiled at how Madame Pomfrey made him feel about seven years old. He shared the mental image with Harry who did smile and glanced over.

"Well then," the woman said, calmly ignoring the exchange between her patients, "thank you for your time, Mr Potter, Mr Malfoy. I will not detain you further. If you require anything contact me through the speaking wall."

"Thank you, Madame Pomfrey," Draco said politely and stood up as the healer turned to leave.

Harry tensed again as the door opened, but his reaction was nowhere near as bad as the first time, however, Draco doubted his lover noticed. When the lock clicked back into place Draco let out a long slow breath and then turned to a rather confused looking Harry. Draco had no doubt that his lover could feel the pride that was running through him at what the Hecatemus has achieved.

[What?] Harry finally asked.

[You, that's what,] Draco said cheerfully. [You did it, Harry, you coped and your barriers didn't slip once. Okay so we came close once, but other than that you were perfect.]

Harry didn't look so sure and the Draco sat down next to his soul mate once more.

"Trust me," he said aloud this time, "I was watching very carefully and you did fantastically."

"I nearly lost it three times," Harry said with less enthusiasm.

"No you didn't," Draco replied firmly. "You had to reinforce your barriers both times the door opened, which is only to be expected, but that was not close to losing it. When you felt Madame Pomfrey's magic you panicked, but you recovered quickly, and there is a reason I'm in this relationship. Now repeat after me, Draco knows best, always listen to Draco."

That finally drew a smile out Harry.

"Draco knows best, always listen to Draco," Harry said in a martyred tone.

For that Draco leant forward and kissed his lover gently. It was like a charm and he could feel the remaining tension flowing out of Harry at the touch. The young man smiled to himself; he really did know best.

Chapter 8 Sharing

[Draco,] Harry said thoughtfully as he played absently with the sandwich he had summoned for lunch.

The blond head popped up from where Draco was reading a large, unfriendly looking text book and Harry found himself pinned down by his lover's grey eyes.

[There are some things I would like to share with you,] he said evenly, [but I don't know if you'll want to know them.]

Information flowed between them like water, but so far it was mostly current things and Harry had been feeling that there was something more that he needed to do. They had talked many times before they had bonded, but part of him wanted more: he wanted Draco to know him more completely than any normal human being could. His instincts wanted to know about Draco as well, but Harry did not want to force his lover into anything.

For a moment Draco looked at him appraisingly and then unfolded from where he was leaning on the bedstead and moved towards Harry. Still without replying Draco climbed back on the bed beside him and took his hand.

[Show me,] his soul mate's mental voice said calmly.

[Some of it's not nice,] Harry warned honestly. [I don't know if I can control it, I just know I want to show you things.]

[I know you came with baggage, Harry,] Draco said evenly, [so did I. I feel it too: it's time.]

Harry looked into his soul mate's eyes, seeing and feeling the unconditional love at the same time. There were no barriers between them, no walls and Harry felt the need to be known and to know.

[I love you,] he said resolutely and let the sensation inside him grow.

It was like an amorphous many-tentacled creature oozing through his mind as Harry let the instinct rise within him and it reached through his memory selecting times and places. He stretched out mentally to Draco and as their thoughts locked it began.

It started with an early memory, Harry recognised himself at no more than four. He was standing in the kitchen at number 4 Privet Drive: his knee hurt and he had been crying. Dudley had pushed him over in the garden, he remembered and he'd skinned his knee. Aunt Petunia had sent him inside with a reprimand for making himself a nuisance. No one was going to help him and he realised that if he was going to stop the pain in his knee he had to do it himself. Resolutely he wiped his eyes and his nose on the already grubby sleeve of the too big shirt he was wearing and then he walked to where he knew Aunt Petunia kept the first aid box.

The image shifted and with a start Harry realised he was no longer inside his own memory. This was Draco's recollection and he was also a child, possibly a little older than Harry had been in the last memory. He was standing in a large study next to a roaring fire; it was his father's study and Lucius was standing in front of his son.

"Draco," the tall blond man said with a warmth in his face that Harry had never seen before, "I think you are old enough to understand some things."

A rush of pride and love ran through the small boy and Harry felt it as if it was his own memory.

"I was very pleased with you today at your Aunt and Uncle's," Lucius continued evenly, "you did justice to the Malfoy name. There are some things you must always remember and now is the time for you to learn them."

Draco nodded to his parent gravely, feeling very important with a perfect trust in his father.

"You must always be superior to those around you, Draco," Lucius said firmly. "You are a Malfoy and we are always winners. I watched you today with the other children and I saw you lead them. That is what it means to be my son; do you understand?"

Looking up at the serious face of the man who was everything to him Draco learned, and he took the lesson right to his heart.

The scene changed again and Harry found himself back in his own past. This time he was at school, the primary school he and Dudley had attended. It was playtime but Harry was still inside with the teacher: he had a cold and he wasn't allowed outside with the other children. He had a book on his lap and he was reading, it was a large book with lots of pictures and fantastic stories of wizards and dragons. It was his favourite and Miss Michaels had pulled it out from the bookshelf for him as soon as the others had gone out to play.

Harry liked Miss Michaels, she was pretty and she didn't look at him like some of the others did. Aunt Petunia told everyone he was a troublesome child and Dudley made sure the other children wouldn't play with him if their mothers hadn't in the first place. Miss Michaels told him not to take any notice of what anyone else said: there were better people in the world than those he had met. When she said it, Harry believed her.

The memories continued, some happy some sad: Draco's grandmother dying; when Harry won the art competition at school because it was judged by someone his Aunt and Uncle had never spoken to; the time Draco had snuck out of his room in the middle of the night and met one of the ancestral ghosts in the garden. They moved through time together experiencing formative events in each of their lives. They shared their joy at their Hogwarts letters and the fear they had felt for the first time on the train. The first conversation in Madame Malkins from both of their perspectives revealed to them how maybe they could have been friends if it hadn't been for childish insecurities.

Harry shared how Hogwarts had become the family he had never had, and Draco showed him just how much being away from home had scared him. They shared everything that had been behind the masks of Gryffindor hero and Slytherin bully.

Then came the first memory of Voldemort: the first time Harry had risked him life for a cause he did not really comprehend. There was no holding back and the Gryffindor let everything flow from him. The vines, the chess set, the potions room, and the mirror with Quirrel in his turban. Harry showed Draco his terror and anger and then the astonishment when Voldemort was defeated. There was no pretence of the infallible hero that over the years the retelling of the tale had turned him into. Harry let Draco see the real events; he revealed his thankfulness

for Hermione's brain; he let his lover feel the confusion and the helplessness as Ron sacrificed himself at the chess board so Harry could go on; and he showed him the complete shock and disgust at finding Quirrel was the enemy. It had been an astounding moment as the Gryffindor realised that not everything was as it seemed and probably one of the most important lessons he had ever learned.

When that memory was over the experience did not shift to Draco this time but moved on to Harry's second year. There was no exchange of recollections this time as his thoughts showed Draco what his life had become about: Tom Riddle, the basilisk and Harry's real fear that he was the evil which threatened his home. He replayed the first time he had heard the monster's voice and how the knowledge only he could hear it had affected him.

Harry let Draco see how they had used the polyjuice, and how after the loss of Hermione the twelve year old Gryffindor had been terrified that it was all his fault. Then the memory skipped to the end of the year where Harry and Ron had taken Lockheart down in the Chamber of Secrets. He revealed the desperation at finding Ginny so still and almost dead, he showed his lover the cold knowledge that the bite of the huge snake would kill him and the determination to stop Voldemort before he died flooded out of his mind.

Draco replied with his memory of the duelling club: exhibiting his determination to beat the great Harry Potter and his fear that he might lose. The images and emotion flooded into Harry and he realised for the first time how much of Draco's life had been about bringing down the Gryffindor hero. What he had never known and he saw as Draco revealed it to him, was how much the way the duel had ended had affected the twelve year old Slytherin.

There for Harry to see was the shock Draco had felt when Harry spoke to the snake: the disbelief that the pure Gryffindor had such a talent; and the jealousy that such a rare gift had been bestowed upon his enemy. Above all Draco showed how dismayed he had been as he realised that never, no matter how hard he worked, would he ever be able to beat Harry in this.

Then came happy memories from them both as if trying to point out that it was not all bad: just little snippets of their lives at Hogwarts before Harry's first meeting with a Dementor slipped into the fray. All of his third year seemed to come at once from Harry, fading through one memory into another showing the uncertainty, the fear, and then the realisation and happiness of finding Sirius who was almost family. There did not appear to be much separation in his mind between memories, as if the whole experience had been crammed into one part of Harry's thoughts. It was all revealed in one long string.

Draco showed Harry his joy at taunting The Boy Who Lived, the excitement of setting up the fake Dementor trick, and the fear that he would disappoint his father with his failure. It was always about being the best, about making his parents proud and memory after memory showed his growing fear that he had failed. Harry knew without a doubt that since the moment they had first spoken he had been a driving force in his lover's life and he was beginning to realise that Draco, although not the focus of everything, was always there in his. It was as if he'd been keeping an eye on his soul mate just waiting for the right time.

There were fewer happy memories now, only the odd one or two between darker scenes. The Triwizard tournament came and went from both their perspectives and the scenes of Cedric's death and Voldemort's return played out in their joined thoughts. Harry showed Draco his guilt and his fear. "Kill the spare" echoed through his mind more than once as he replayed the events for his lover, sharing

his pain. These were the events which made him who he was: knowledge and terror too large for a fourteen year old boy, thrust upon him by a madman.

It was all about Voldemort now for both of them. Every thought they shared was overshadowed by He Who Shall Not Be Named as his interference shaped their lives. Surprisingly Draco shared more memories from that time than Harry: he had been in contact with his father far more than the Gryffindor ever realised and he had been a major source of information. The fact that he had betrayed Harry in so many ways left Draco's thoughts tinged heavily with guilt because they both knew what was coming.

Harry showed his lover only one memory of any length from his fifth year and that played out in slow, agonising detail. It started as the rescue party from the Order burst in to the Department of Mysteries; it moved through the battle that resulted; it seemed to crawl through the precious seconds when Sirius fell, stupefied through the veil; and surprisingly it ended with Harry's failed Cruciatus curse at Bellatrix Lestrange. Every moment of anger and pain was so clear it was almost like reliving it; only this time Harry could feel the mental arms of his lover holding him tightly.

Draco's reply was the disbelief and anger he had felt when he heard of his father's capture. The humiliation and fear that his parent could fail so completely was not something Harry had understood.

Their worlds had come crashing down and they shared their pain and sorrow and their will to go on. Harry showed Draco the double life he had lived through his sixth year and Draco revealed how he had had to grow up and face that this was not a children's game anymore.

And finally there was Draco's meeting with Voldemort: the turning point of a boy's life that truly made him a man. Harry felt his lover's fear and excitement when his father arrived at the Manor and instructed him to get ready. His time had finally come and Draco was ready to take his place by Lucius' side for the Dark Lord's great cause. Harry saw Voldemort through Draco's eyes and felt his shock at the twisted, ugly thing he was presented to like a present: nothing like the true Death Eater's son had imagined; nothing like he had been told. Then came the realisation; the dawning light as Draco listened to the shell of a creature speak and watched as Voldemort's minions crawled to their master on their hands and knees. It had suddenly become clear for Draco and he had understood.

But worst of all was the following betrayal. Draco showed Harry how he had revealed the truth to his father, how he expected his parent to explain and show him that everything was not as it seemed. Draco let him see his complete terror, as he understood that his father was beyond angry, and he shared the torture his parent had put him through. The pain had been bad and Draco had begged for mercy, but that was not what had almost destroyed him. What had left him crying into his pillow every night was the knowledge that his father was lost; the inescapable truth that Lucius had been claimed by a madness from which he would never recover.

Everything Draco had believed in had died that Summer and he had been empty when he returned to school: empty and waiting to be filled by Harry Potter.

The room filtered back in slowly and Harry found himself still looking into Draco's grey gaze. They had not shown each other everything, the process had not leeched every memory from their minds and given it to the other, but now they

understood. Harry could feel the knowledge of himself in his soul mate and Harry recognized what it was that fundamentally made Draco who he was. They did not move for a long time and then Harry sat forward and drew his lover into a fierce embrace.

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Harry was sitting stretched out on the bed reading Quidditch Weekly when the talking wall flashed up some words. He looked up and read the message.

{Can we come in? It's Ron and Hermione. Madame Pomfrey says it's time you had visitors.}

The idea of letting people through the door filled Harry with the same trepidation as it had done when Madame Pomfrey had been in, but he was also over the moon that his friends had come to see him. As usual he found himself conflicted. He had spoken to Ron and Hermione through the wall every day, but it was not easy to have conversations in six-inch high letters where everyone could see, especially when your predicament was a secret to all but a select few. Draco had spoken to several of the Slytherins the same way keeping up the pretence that being locked in isolation with Harry Potter was the worst experience known to man.

[Are you okay?] came from Draco's direction.

He was having a soak in the bath, something of which Draco seemed inordinately fond, but Harry heard the water splash as his lover sat up and asked his question.

[Fine,] he told Draco as calmly as he could manage, [Ron and Hermione just asked to come in.]

[Are you sure you're up to visitors?] came the overprotective response and the water splashed again.

[We can't stay in here forever,] Harry replied evenly. [Relax. You finish your bath and I'll let them in. Just don't prance out of the bathroom stark naked.]

[Potter,] Draco said pointedly, [no matter what your fantasies, I have no intention of streaking for your friends.]

Harry laughed and climbed off the bed. He lent into the bathroom where his lover was up to his neck in suds, blew Draco a kiss and then closed the door. Walking to the talking wall he touched the activation stone.

"Hi, it's Harry," he said and the words wrote on the wall under the other message, "give me five minutes and then ask Madame Pomfrey to let you in."

{Great,} came the response, {see you soon.}

Once that was settled Harry wandered over to the summoning alcove.

"Tea and cake for four, please," he said politely.

A table, a teapot, four cups and saucers, a pile of plates and a two-layer tray of cakes appeared almost instantly.

"Thank you," Harry said with a half smile.

Draco and he had discovered over their time in the room that when Dumbledore had told them to ask the alcove nicely for things, he had not been using a turn of phrase. Only once had Draco demanded something from it without a please or thank you and rather than a cheese sandwich and a glass of milk he had ended up with a milk sandwich and a glass of cheese. Since then they had both taken great care to be polite to the alcove and not hurt its feelings.

Once the niceties had been sorted out, Harry returned to the bed where he sat down and crossed his legs. He had been practising keeping his mental barriers in place for two days now and he was feeling quite optimistic. The only problem was, he had never tried without Draco right by his side when there was anyone in the room. Using the door as a point of focus he brought his shields up to the point where it looked completely normal.

[You're getting good at that,] Draco commented from the other room.

When Harry played with his mental protection his soul mate always seemed to know and Draco sounded quite proud of him.

[Thanks,] Harry replied with a smile, [I hope it lasts.]

He went back to testing his shields, wondering how they would hold up against real people. There was a knock at the door; the door opened quickly; Ron and Hermione shot through and then the door closed again. Harry beamed at his friends and climbed off the bed.

"Hello," he greeted cheerfully, hands slipping into his pockets in a reflex gesture to stop himself reaching out to them.

"Hello, yourself," Ron replied with a grin, "it's like getting into a goblin vault coming to see you."

"They don't want us escaping," Harry joked back, "they've only taken the manacles off to keep up appearances."

The other two laughed, but it turned into a vaguely awkward silence. Face to face was so much harder than through the wall and it was obvious no one really knew what to say next.

"I ordered us some tea and cake," Harry broke the pause a little too enthusiastically, "would you like some?"

"You know me," Ron said with a far too bright smile, "always up for food."

"Thanks," was all Hermione added to the conversation.

Harry busied himself with playing the perfect host, trying not to dwell on how awkward the whole situation felt. There was no chair so his friends perched on the edge of the bed as he poured the tea. It was as Harry was reaching for the plates trying to figure out what neutral topic of conversation to bring up when he decided he was being an idiot.

"This is stupid," he said, half to himself and half to the world.

Standing up straight he took a deep breath and turned round.

"Hello," he said firmly, "I'm Harry Potter. Have we met?"

Ron and Hermione glanced at one another and slowly a smile began playing at best friend's lips quickly mirrored by Hermione.

"We're being ridiculous aren't we," the girl said with a shake of her head.

Harry nodded.

"I think I was about to turn into Mother Hen," he said with a wry grin.

"That would be a waste of a good animagus," Ron said lightly.

Harry managed to laugh at that and a good deal of the tension in the room reduced considerably. Feeling somewhat better about the whole thing Harry gave out the tea and cake.

"So what's the rumour mill saying about us?" he asked and sat back down at the head of the bed. "Do they reckon I poisoned Draco or he poisoned me?"

"Well the official story has about a fifty percent supporter rate," Ron provided cheerfully, "but the next most popular theory is that He Who Must Not Be Named attacked you using Malfoy and that he was trying to polish you off and was caught in the cross fire."

"And they become more ridiculous from there," Hermione put in with a disgusted tone of voice. "So far no one has even guessed at a glimmer of the truth."

At least Harry could be thankful for small mercies. It was not easy living your life when everyone else was interested in your affairs, and the truth being leaked was one of his greatest fears.

"So how's life in here?" Hermione continued the conversation. "Dumbledore asked me to pick up all the work you're missing for both of you, did you get it okay?"

"Yes, thanks," Harry replied with a dramatic sigh. "No rest for the wicked. Snape's note about handing in the essay late was just so sympathetic; you'd think I disrupted his lesson deliberately."

Ron snorted a laugh at that.

"Just be glad you haven't been in the classroom," Hermione told Harry conspiratorially, "ever since you collapsed Snape had been impossible. He's been taking house points left right and centre, even from the Slytherins."

"And he's just as bad if you meet him in the hallways," Ron agreed earnestly.

"He doesn't do worry well," the voice came from the direction of the bathroom and Harry turned to see Draco standing in the doorway.

His lover was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of Harry's jeans that were slightly too long and came down over his bare feet. Draco's damp hair was falling round his face in a delightfully unordered way and Harry thought he'd never seen his soul mate look quite so edible. If they had been alone Draco probably wouldn't have been wearing the clothes very long. Harry had never really had time to be a normal, hormonal driven teenager and girls had often been the last thing on his

mind, but these days he didn't seem to be able to keep his mind off sex; well at least not when Draco was in the room.

"If that's worry, I'd hate to see fear," Ron commented.

Harry noticed that his best friend no longer looked comfortable, but that was to be expected, after all Draco was Ron's number one enemy. It was not going to be easy for either to accept the other.

"If he shows he cares he'll blow his cover," Draco said as if explaining it to a child, "it's not exactly done for a Death Eater to be worrying about pupils."

Hermione looked at Harry and he knew she was thinking the same thing he was: head off the pair before they ended up in an argument.

"Professor Dumbledore told us you're on our side now," the young woman launched into a different topic of conversation in an attempt to distract Draco. "Do you mind me asking why?"

Harry saw his lover's eyes harden and a spike of anger went through the private young man.

[He had to tell them,] Harry said soothingly, [they need to know if they're going to help us.]

Draco was very touchy about his personal business and he was obviously uncomfortable about Dumbledore mentioning his position to anyone. Harry sent his soul mate some supportive emotions and patted the bed beside him. For a moment Draco appeared undecided and then he walked across the room, stepped up onto the bed and sat down against the headboard the other side of Harry. He did not feel particularly happy about the situation, but so far things were going better than Harry had expected.

"My reasons involve Voldemort, my father, me and the Cruciatus curse," Draco said shortly, "and that is as far as I care to discus it right now."

Without really thinking about it Harry put his arm around his lover and he saw Ron's eyes open slightly in surprise. Obviously, being told some facts and actually seeing them were two different things for his best friend. Draco leant into the offered comfort and relaxed a little: somehow life always seemed so much easier when they were together.

"How long were you two seeing each other before you, ah..?" Hermione tried yet another tack: Harry gave her a thank you with his eyes.

"Shagged?" Draco filled in for her.

Harry had the distinct impression that his lover was going for the shock value, but his response drew a smile from the girl instead. Draco felt surprised, but he did not show anything on the outside.

"Since a couple of weeks into term," Harry provided the answer. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you, but the more people who knew about Draco the greater the danger his father would find out."

He neglected to mention he also thought Ron would have gone ballistic. If he admitted to the truth, Harry had been quite glad that he had been unconscious when his friend had found out about Draco.

"We wouldn't have told anyone, you could have given us a hint," Ron said in a slightly hurt tone.

"I asked him not to," surprisingly Draco's voice held none of its previous anger.

Harry appreciated his lover taking the heat for this decision, but he was not going to let him take all the blame.

"And I couldn't take the risk that we'd be overheard, Ron," Harry said calmly. "I don't think your reaction would have been quiet."

His friend still looked hurt, but as Hermione took her boyfriend's hand the frown growing on his face slowly dissipated. Following a sudden urge Harry weakened his mental barriers until he could just see the forces around him. He looked at his two friends and couldn't help smiling.

"Did you know love is gold?" he said quietly.

Hermione smiled back at him and Ron appeared a little startled at the sudden change in conversation. As the surprise wore off, Harry could tell that a thousand questions piled into his best friend's brain.

"You can really see that?" Ron asked eventually.

Harry nodded openly.

"People in love glow," he said calmly, "it's the easiest emotion to see. Magic looks metallic as well, but it's different somehow."

If asked to explain how he could tell the difference between a gold piece of magic and an emotion Harry wouldn't have been able to: to him it was just obvious.

"Can you tell what other people are thinking?" Ron asked a little hesitantly.

"Only Draco," Harry assured him with a grin, "and that's distracting enough."

"You think my mind's distracting," Draco commented dryly, "I'm not the sex crazed loon. You should try it from this side."

"Funny," Harry replied without pausing to think, "I don't recall hearing you complaining."

"Really?" Draco shot back almost instantly. "I'm sure I remember..."

Hermione coughed and Harry looked up to find a bright red Ron looking anywhere but at him and Draco. Harry was not sure whether to laugh or be mortified over what he and his soul mate had just been saying. In the end he went for the laugh.

"Sorry," he apologised as he regained his composure, "I guess that was a little too much information, but, Ron, you did want to know everything."

His friend picked up the first thing that came to hand and threw it: it was a chocolate éclair and it hit Harry square on the nose. Draco found this hilariously funny and laughed loudly until a cream bun collided with his chest. Harry glanced over to see Hermione looking totally unrepentant. Harry looked at his lover who looked right back.

[Do they get away with that?] Harry asked calmly.

[Merlin, no!] was Draco's instant response.

A large slice of Victoria sponge went sailing through the air to hit Ron on the ear and a custard doughnut made a beautiful mess down Hermione's hair. After that it was a free for all: every witch and wizard for herself or himself. It took five minutes to turn the whole room into a war zone at which point they ran out of ammunition and collapsed in giggling heaps wherever they happened to be.

"God, I haven't done anything that silly since I was twelve," Draco said as he tried to pull cream out of his hair where he was sitting next to the bathroom door.

"I beg to differ," Ron said grandly, "there was the ferret incident."

The two looked at each other for a moment, Ron had obviously just realised what he'd said and did not know how Draco was going to react. Harry watched them, totally unconcerned -- there was no anger coming from his lover. Ron appeared to he holding his breath and he let it out in one big rush when Draco finally smiled.

"Do you have any idea how confusing it is to suddenly find you have fur?" the cream covered Slytherin said, much to Ron's surprise.

Harry laughed: this might just work after all. If nothing else they could bond over the clearing up; there did not appear to be a single surface in the room that was not covered in some form of cake.

"Actually, yes," Ron said much to both Harry and Hermione's shock, "has Harry told you about the Animagus stuff yet?"

Maybe covering a room in confectionary was more of a bonding ritual than Harry had realised because he was quite amazed by Ron's words. Draco was in Harry's head; Harry was in Draco's; so they would find out everything about each other eventually, although they hadn't covered that particular topic yet, but that possibly the Gryffindor most paranoid about 'evil Slytherins' was revealing information to a Malfoy, willingly, was quite astounding.

"You're an Animagus?" Draco looked and felt startled, and he was looking at Ron with a kind of respect Harry had never seen in his eyes before.

"Actually we all are," his friend replied, obviously enjoying the trump card he had just played.

Draco looked at Harry open mouthed and appeared to be trying to figure out if Ron was pulling his leg.

[It's true,] Harry replied honestly, [it all has to do with Sirius. It's a long story, we'll explain.]

"You had bloody well better," Draco said out loud which confused the other two people in the room.

This was turning into a fun afternoon: Harry was looking forward to this conversation. He may have been madly in love with Draco, but that didn't mean shocking him to the roots of his white blond hair was not entertaining as well.

Chapter 9 The Passing of Time

It had not been a surprise when the request had arrived that members of staff be allowed to visit, in fact when Hermione and Ron had been the first to come and see them Harry had suspected Dumbledore's influence. He had expected more official members of the school to be the first in and he had been glad when that was not the case. As it was, the day after his friends had dropped by Madame Pomfrey had informed the pair that the headmaster wished to visit, as did their house heads.

Draco had put his foot down when it came to too many people in quick succession and so it had been agreed that Dumbledore would visit one day and Snape and McGonagall the next. It didn't stop Harry from being nervous, but at least it was going to be the headmaster first: he wanted to know he could deal with one powerful wizard before he was faced with Snape and his own house head in any shape or form.

"Harry," the headmaster said brightly after the initial greetings were over, "the furniture arrangements appear to be a little sparse, would it make you uncomfortable if I were to conjure myself a chair?"

Harry couldn't help himself, the grip he had on Draco's hand tightened.

"Um, ah, a little," he admitted honestly, "but I have to get used to it sometime and now is as good as any."

That earned him a smile from the headmaster and Dumbledore pulled out his wand. The use of magic in his vicinity that was not his own or Draco's caused Harry's mental barrier against the energy to vibrate, which was a little unsettling, but he handled it quite easily. Yesterday Draco had performed all the housecleaning spells to clear up the mess they had caused with the food fight after they had discovered he was sensitive to everything else, and that didn't seem to bother Harry at all.

[Just relax,] Draco said silently, [you're doing fine.]

[This feels very odd,] Harry replied analysing the experience even as he spoke. [Would you mind if I lowered the levels a little bit, I'd like to see what he's doing?]

Dumbledore had produced himself a comfortable looking armchair, but he did not seem satisfied with the arrangement and was preparing to do something else.

[Are you sure that's a good idea?] Draco asked evenly and Harry could tell that his soul mate was desperately reigning in his protective instincts.

[Won't know unless I try,] Harry admitted openly, [but I have to practice sometime.]

[Okay,] Draco agreed reluctantly, [but not too far, and see if you can just lower the one shield, Dumbledore doesn't look like the emotional type, but you never know, and I don't think you want to be swamped with anything.]

Harry gave his lover a smile and then turned his attention to the headmaster who seemed to have decided something and had his wand in the air once more. Very carefully he thinned the mental wall which prevented his mind from overloading on the magic surrounding him. It was not easy for Harry to pick just his shield to

the magical energy since all his mental barriers were in essence part of a whole, but for once it worked quite well. Dumbledore was suddenly awash with metallic hues and Harry felt his mouth open slightly in awe: the headmaster was literally ablaze with magic. As Dumbledore conjured himself a large soft cushion Harry just stared.

"Harry," Dumbledore's voice broke into his reverie, as Harry stood there rather dumbfounded, "you look startled. Is everything all right?"

Dragging his eyes back to the headmaster's face Harry looked the other wizard in the eye. Dumbledore was standing in front of the large armchair and he appeared concerned.

"Oh, yes everything's fine," he told him, snapping himself out of his shock. "I was just, ah, trying to watch the spell and was ... um."

"Distracted," Draco filled in for him.

"Professor," Harry couldn't help himself, "I think I can see why Voldemort is afraid of you; you glow."

The slightly worried expression on Dumbledore's face cleared into another smile at this admission.

"Ah, well, My Boy," the headmaster said cheerfully and sat down, "the older a wizard or witch becomes the more magic they radiate. You young people tend to keep it all inside where as at my age, I'm afraid I leak."

Harry grinned at that, but he was positive that very few people would leak like Albus Dumbledore. It then occurred to him that maybe he and Draco should sit down at some point as well.

"Tea?" Harry offered since it seemed the polite thing to do.

"Thank you but not at the moment, My Boy," the headmaster said warmly, so by mutual accord Harry and Draco sat down on the side of the bed.

Harry strengthened his barriers and the world returned to normal.

"Well, gentlemen," Dumbledore said calmly, "this is an unusual situation and we must decide how to handle it."

It was a straight to the point kind of conversation then: Harry was glad.

"We have to make sure no one finds out the truth," he said very rapidly. He had been thinking about it for quite some time.

Draco felt a little surprised by the vehemence with which his soul mate stated his opinion and Harry squeezed his lover's hand in reassurance.

"Do you not think that a somewhat impractical plan, Harry?" the headmaster's tone was calm and reasonable, but it made no difference to the determined young man.

"I don't really care if it's impractical," he replied firmly, "we just have to find some way of doing it. If this gets out Draco goes from Death-Eater-in-training to number two on Voldemort's hit list. Even if he never goes home again he's just an

inconvenience, if they find out about this you may as well tattoo 'Kill me I'm attached to Harry Potter' on his forehead."

It was not something on which Harry was willing to compromise: if Draco decided to withdraw from the conflict he could be ignored, if he was linked with the Wizarding worlds first Hecatemus he would become a target. Dumbledore viewed Harry steadily for a moment.

"My Boy," the headmaster said kindly and looked him straight in the eye, "you and Draco are newly bonded and you have no training with your abilities. How can you hope to hide such a fundamental change in your status?"

Dumbledore was being so reasonable and his argument was sound, but Harry was adamant and he was willing to say so. He opened his mouth to reply but Draco beat him to it.

"With all due respect, Professor," his lover came in on Harry's side, "I'm a Slytherin and Harry's a Gryffindor: with my deviousness and his obstinacy I'm sure we can come up with something."

[Thank you,] Harry said warmly, gratified by the support.

[I'm not about to argue with you on this,] Draco replied in kind. [It would be safer for both of us if no one else knows, and although I think it's going to be bloody difficult, I'm willing to try if you are.]

Harry squeezed his lover's hand in reply.

[I see broom cupboards and locking spells in our future,] Draco commented dryly.

When Harry glanced back at the headmaster, Dumbledore appeared thoughtful.

"If that is the way you wish to proceed," the headmaster said calmly, "then that is what we shall do. Draconigena Mumps has a quarantine period of fifteen days which leaves us eight days remaining. Will it be possible for you both to be ready by Halloween?"

It was a daunting thought and Harry looked at Draco: eight days was not very long to come to grips with so many changes. It would be impossible to understand everything by then, but they had to try.

[I think it's going to be more than bloody difficult,] Harry commented as he considered the idea. [We're going to have to work night and day to get me to a point where I'm not going to blow the whole thing as soon as I step outside that door.]

[It's not just you I'm worried about,] Draco replied wryly. [I have to go back to my 'friends' and not hex them into next week when they start insulting you.]

[Think we can do it?] Harry asked, honestly not sure it was possible, but wanting to believe it was.

Draco gave him a small smile.

[I think we can do anything,] his lover replied.

They turned back to their audience.

"Yes," they said at the same time.

Dumbledore nodded.

"Then that at least is settled," the headmaster acknowledged firmly. "This, however, unfortunately also means that any training you undertake must be conducted in secret. This will be complicated to plan, Gentlemen, and I will not pretend it will be easy for either of you."

"We understand, Professor," Draco said firmly, and Harry's fingers tightened reflexively on his lover's hand, "but we have to try."

The headmaster nodded sagely and then, after a few moments when Harry wondered what the Dumbledore would say next, the headmaster's face broke into a broad smile.

"Well, we have time to come up with a stratagem so on to a more pleasant topic," Dumbledore said brightly. "How are you both coming along after bonding?"

From the amusement that ran through Draco at the question, Harry had the distinct impression that his lover was likely to answer in a manner that the bashful Gryffindor would find highly embarrassing. Desperately trying to think of something to say before his soul mate opened his mouth, Harry launched into the conversation with only the barest clue of what the end of his sentence would be.

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Awkward did not quite cover the overall feeling in their room, but having McGonagall and Snape visit at the same time was the only way the couple could think to arrange things without insulting one of the professors. It was also difficult to make yourself scarce when you were confined to one room and a bathroom, so inviting their house heads in separately would have been uncomfortable for each of them at some point anyway. Snape had suggested that Draco could leave the room to meet with him at which point Harry's very protective soul mate had gone ballistic and Harry had averted a conflict by pointing out to Snape that there would be a danger of someone seeing Draco. Snape had no idea how close he had come to being hexed into the next century.

Hence in the interests of harmony and general good will Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall had arrived together and then politely split to either side of the room, each with the member of their house. Draco found the whole situation absurd and hilarious, Harry just felt uncomfortable.

[I can't believe we're doing this,] Harry said silently as he poured Professor McGonagall a cup of tea. [Can't we just have a civil conversation with all four of us?]

[If our house heads wish to act like children I suggest we let them,] Draco replied with an amused mental laugh, [it could provide useful blackmail material later.]

"Sugar, Professor?" Harry asked politely.

"Thank you, Harry," Professor McGonagall replied with a smile, "I think I will today. One lump please."

The Gryffindor popped a cube into the teacup he was holding, placed a spoon on the saucer and then passed the whole ensemble to his housemistress. She stirred it thoughtfully for a few seconds as Harry sat down in the chair Professor McGonagall had conjured for him to sit on.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" she asked conversationally. "You gave us quite a scare when you collapsed like that."

"I'm fine now, thank you, Professor," he replied while trying to ignore the fact that Snape was on the other side of the room. "It's a little odd, but Draco's very good at figuring out what I'm supposed to be doing."

At the Slytherin's name a shadow passed across the head of Gryffindor's face but she hid it quickly. It seemed that the professor had not yet come to terms with the fact that one of the most hated boys in the school was actually on the side of the light. At least she appeared to be trying, however, and Harry doubted he could say the same for Snape.

[Oh, here it comes,] Draco's voice sounded in his mind as if to back up what he was thinking, [he's going to say something about you I can tell.]

[Just remember you promised not to hex him,] Harry replied, although his lover sounded amused rather than annoyed so he hoped the warning was unnecessary.

The problem was that Draco was very quick to fly off the handle just at the moment; it was something they were working on as much as Harry's shielding.

"No ill effects from the bonding then?" Harry switched back to the verbal conversation as Professor McGonagall spoke.

"Well there are effects," he said with a grin and glanced over at Draco before his brain caught up with the fact that he was talking to his housemistress not his lover, "but yes," he continued fighting not to blush at the thoughts that had been wandering though his head, "there are no ill effects."

Surprisingly when he looked back at the professor she was smiling slightly in a very knowing way. Harry was not sure he wanted to know what the woman was thinking.

"You appear very happy, My Dear Boy," she said warmly. "I don't believe I have seen you this joyful since you first arrived at Hogwarts. I am very glad."

Harry found himself beaming at his house head as his embarrassment fell away: he was extremely happy.

"It's as if I've found what I've always been looking for," he said exuberantly, wanting to share his joy. "I never realised that someone could have something in their life that made everything else irrelevant. It doesn't matter what happens tomorrow or the next day, all that's important is I have Draco and he has me."

Harry paused, not sure he could explain it in words.

"Does that sound terribly selfish?" he asked eventually.

"I think," Professor McGonagall said gently but firmly, "that even if it is, it is about time you allowed yourself to enjoy it. I have watched you grow from boy to

man, Harry, and you deserve a focus in your life that is not the darkest wizard our time has seen."

It was just like when his house head had stood up to Umbridge in that the witch gave him her complete support. Harry suddenly realised that in Minerva McGonagall he had a friend who would never doubt him, and he was slightly amazed.

[I don't believe it,] Draco interrupted his thoughts with an incredulous outburst which quickly morphed into amusement. [Oh this is priceless; I think Snape is actually trying to ask me if you forced me to have sex with you. I think I might play dumb, I've never seen him quite so uncomfortable.]

Revenge for suggesting that Draco be anywhere but at his soul mate's side was obviously on the Slytherin's mind. For a moment Harry pitied Snape, but he could not quite keep the small smile off his face.

[Bet you can't get him to actually say 'sex',] he replied lightly.

There was silence from his lover for a moment and Harry could feel Draco's thoughts working madly: he appeared to be considering the challenge.

[What do I get if I win?] he eventually asked in a cajoling manner.

[Anything you want,] Harry replied without hesitation, after all he was quite willing to give Draco anything he wanted without a bet so it was not exactly a difficult thing to offer.

A mental image flashed into his head that caused him to blush furiously and he looked at Professor McGonagall to see if she had noticed. The woman was looking at him quizzically and he gave her a rather sheepish smile.

[Done,] he replied to his soul mate. "Draco just wanted to tell me something," he said aloud to Professor McGonagall.

The professor raised her eyebrows and took a sip of her tea: she did not appear to mind, but she was far too perceptive for Harry's comfort. He had never considered his house head as anything but a forthright spinster before, but it appeared that Professor McGonagall was not as repressed as he might have thought.

"You appear flushed, Mr Potter," she said in a perfectly innocent tone, "is it too hot in here for you?"

Harry gave her a grin to acknowledge he knew he was being teased and he enjoyed the feeling of camaraderie until he saw his Professor's expression become more serious.

"Have you thought much about what you will do when you return to the rest of the school?" McGonagall asked in a manner that suggested she would back off if Harry did not wish to talk about it.

"We spoke with Professor Dumbledore yesterday," he replied with a small shrug, "and I expect he told you we don't want everyone to know."

The head of Gryffindor house nodded: everyone involved would have had to know so Harry was not surprised.

"That means we have to pretend to go on as normal," he continued thoughtfully, "but to tell you the truth I really don't know what the difficulties are going to be. I don't even know what it's like outside and we're going to have to open the door sooner rather than later."

Professor McGonagall nodded sympathetically: she appeared to at least partially understand.

"Forgive me for saying so, Harry," the witch commented evenly, "but you appeared somewhat uncomfortable when I conjured the chairs."

"I was," he admitted honestly, "when people use magic I can feel it and I'm not used to it yet. It was easier today than yesterday, but I'm not sure if that's because it was Dumbledore yesterday and you today, or if the more I'm exposed to it the easier it is."

Once the words had left his mouth he suddenly realised that he might have just insulted his house head and he looked at her anxiously. Harry deduced that his emotions were showing on his face because the professor smiled at him.

"Don't worry, young man," she said with a raise of her eyebrows, "no witch or wizard could be insulted by being deemed inferior to Albus Dumbledore."

The worried youth breathed a sigh or relief.

"I think I'll ask Ron and Hermione to try a few spells when they next visit," Harry mapped out his reasoning. "That should give us an idea of what's going on. Draco can usually figure out what's happening with me, but he says he doesn't have enough information on this point yet."

"Well if I can be of any assistance just let me know," Professor McGonagall said supportively. "If anyone can achieve this endeavour then, Harry, I believe it is you and Mr Malfoy."

That brought another smile to Harry's face and he nodded again.

"Thank you, Professor," he said genuinely, "we'll keep that in mind."

There was so much planning to do, but Harry knew that the only people who could sensibly do it were himself and Draco. They could talk things over with their house heads and others who were aware of the situation, but as a couple they had to have the ideas first. With this in mind Harry decided to change the subject.

"So, have I missed anything important?" he asked in a conversational manner.

"I think perhaps Mr Weasley could do with the return of your levelling influence," Professor McGonagall said cheerfully. "Only yesterday he transfigured his quill into a rather sad looking centipede instead of a long tailed moth."

Harry laughed and they launched into light-hearted conversation about exactly what had been going on in Gryffindor house since he had been confined.

[Yes!] Draco's mental voice crowed in his lover's mind just as Professor McGonagall was chatting happily about what she had heard about the last Quidditch practice. [He said it; I made Snape say 'sex'.]

Along with this exclamation came a mental image and Harry couldn't help himself, he burst out laughing. The distaste on Snape's face was priceless and made the man look constipated. Professor McGonagall looked somewhat surprised since what she had been saying was not particularly funny.

"Um," Harry tried to think of something to say, "sorry, um, Draco," was all he managed in little more than a whisper.

The Gryffindor was facing away from his lover and the head of Slytherin, but Professor McGonagall was not and she glanced over at the pair, at which point she smiled.

"Professor Snape appears somewhat uncomfortable," she observed quietly, which seemed to please her no end. "I do wonder what they're talking about."

"Sex," Harry said before he could help himself, and he blushed with embarrassment, but it was worth it to see the look of abject enjoyment on his house head's face.

"Oh, priceless," Professor McGonagall seemed delighted and totally unfazed by the whole topic, which after the pervious teasing was not a surprise to Harry.

He grinned and briefly considered what to say next, before he decided to go with the flow and be dammed with the consequences.

"Snape suggested that Draco could leave the room to meet him," he explained lightly. "Draco is a little over protective at the moment and he's taking revenge."

That drew a raised eyebrow from Professor McGonagall.

"Remind me never to place myself on the wrong side of your soul mate," she said with an amused smile. "I do hope you know what you have let yourself in for."

Harry laughed.

"Oh I have a fair idea," he replied warmly.

On impulse he sent Draco a mental embrace and settled down to drink his rapidly cooling tea. He was feeling far more comfortable now.

Chapter 10 Plans and Practice

Harry sat on the end of the bed playing thoughtfully with the eleven inches of holly and phoenix feather that was his wand. Draco had just been putting him through his paces with ordinary magic to make sure his new situation did not affect his normal abilities and it had started him thinking. It wasn't that his Hecatemus side had repercussions to his magic: he was more aware of it now and he was pretty sure there were resources at his disposal now that had not been there before, but everything he had learnt in school was still applicable. It was more to do with the fact that it was so normal and it brought in ideas of the outside.

"We're going to have to go to the feast, you know," Harry said eventually and looked over to where Draco was playing with a levitation charm.

"Halloween is the deadline," his soul mate pointed out, "we can always come out on the Monday."

Harry looked at Draco steadily and raised his eyebrows.

"Draco, you're supposed to be the Slytherin here," he said with a slight smile, "don't go protective and Gryffindor on me."

The Slytherin scowled at him for that insinuation, but it did make him lower the book he was levitating back onto the table and walk over.

"Don't accuse me of things like that," Draco said a little sulkily.

Harry grabbed him and pulled him into a hug while depositing a kiss on the top of his lover's head.

"I'm sorry," he said playfully, and let the other youth go so he could sit down properly, "but you know we have to go. If we were like we used to be we'd be begging Madame Pomfrey to let us out for the feast. If we pop up perfectly healthy the next day even the Hufflepuffs will think it's odd."

Draco still didn't look very happy and from the emotions coming off him Harry could tell his lover still didn't like the idea.

"I know you're right," he admitted after a few moments, "but I don't have to like it."

After speaking Draco sighed and turned to face Harry with an appraising look: Harry let himself be studied.

"There's so much we just don't know," Draco said eventually, "and right now the idea of you in a crowd scares the magic out of me."

"Likewise, ditto and also," Harry admitted honestly, "but what scares me more is being across the other side of the hall from you."

He sighed; the whole idea of returning to the school population was daunting, and if it hadn't been for the fact that he was sure if people found out Draco would become a prime target, Harry would have hidden in the hospital wing for as long as possible. His lover was in no way a soft target; Draco was quite capable of taking care of himself, but Harry suspected his soul mate would be viewed as the

easier way of taking out the Boy Who Lived. After all, Harry did have a nasty knack of surviving anything thrown at him.

"If Voldemort keeled over tomorrow I would shout your name from the rooftops," Harry said resignedly, "but somehow I don't see the evil bastard obliging us."

"If I ever get my wand on that dark hearted parasite he is going to understand what dying really means," Draco said rather vehemently, which caused Harry to look at his lover very carefully.

His soul mate had voiced his dislike of Voldemort several times before the pair had bonded, but Harry had always gained the impression that Draco thought the dark wizard was someone else's problem. Now it sounded personal.

"Just remember I'm the Gryffindor," he said evenly; "I'm the one who does the recklessly heroic stuff."

The worry he knew he was projecting was what finally broke through Draco's slight sulk and he grinned.

"Don't worry," Draco said in a mock superior tone, "my Gryffindor-ish tendencies only go so far as making sure no one hurts you. I am not about to go running off to face the Dark Lord on your behalf."

"Thank heavens," Harry said; dramatically wiping his brow, "I thought I might have to check you into St Mungo's, and a straight jacket can be hard on a relationship."

"Oh I don't know," Draco replied with a wiggle of his eye brows, at which point Harry burst out laughing.

It was not long before Draco was laughing as well, but they sobered quickly as Harry remembered the start of the conversation.

"So we're agreed then," he said evenly, "we tell Dumbledore we'll be leaving the morning of the feast."

[We're agreed,] Draco replied, a frown gracing his features, [but we have a cauldron full of work to do before that.]

Harry reached out and ran his hand down his soul mate's arm; the simple gesture bringing with it the quiet rightness he always felt when in contact with Draco. This sense strengthened his resolve and he looked his lover in the eye.

[We can be ready,] Harry said calmly with a certainty that beggared no argument.

[Yes, Harry,] Draco agreed with an exasperated sigh, [we can be ready. If we have to spend every waking moment practicing, we'll be ready.]

That caused Harry to smile wickedly.

"Not every waking moment, surely," he said suggestively.

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Blinking and reigning back in his scattered thoughts Harry couldn't help by admire his lover's teaching methods as Draco pulled away from the very passionate kiss in which the pair had just been engaged. Harry was sitting next to the door of their room with his back against the wall: the door was open and he was practising shielding his mind from the forces emanating from beyond it.

The basic idea was the same as ever, but the more there was to sure his mental barriers against, the more difficult it became for Harry to concentrate on anything else at the same time. Draco had launched on a strategy of what he called positive reinforcement.

At first the door had only been opened a crack and remained that way for under a minute. Once Draco had closed the door for the first time he had pinned Harry to the wall for a quick kiss. In the forty-five minutes since, every time Harry's performance with his abilities improved, Draco upped the passion he put into kissing and fondling his soul mate. While it was an unusual approach Harry was enjoying himself immensely and his subconscious seemed to be paying attention as well because he was definitely becoming much more proficient with his mental barriers. Draco hadn't even bothered to close the door before he "rewarded" Harry the last time.

[You're doing brilliantly,] his soul mate congratulated him cheerfully.

There was only one problem with Draco's unique approach and that was the fact that there was only so far two people could go when fully clothed. Harry's libido was a constant force in his life these days and his lover, quite frankly, had him all hot and bothered. Draco went to move away from Harry since one of the things they were testing was how comfortable he was with some distance between himself and his soul mate, but Harry caught Draco's hand.

"Harry," Draco said rolling his eyes, "let go."

Harry grinned and shook his head.

"You play with fire, you take the heat," he said hungrily and shifted onto his knees without releasing his lover.

There was only so much teasing Harry could take and Draco had found his limit. His soul mate appeared to realise this because he allowed himself to be pulled in for another kiss.

[You're an addict you know that don't you?] Draco commented dryly in Harry's mind as they moulded together.

[But you have to admit I have good taste in addictions,] Harry replied and let the passion he was feeling flow through his body and into his lover's.

Draco moaned as the obsessed Hecatemus let his hands roam over his lover's body and Harry smiled as he broke the kiss so he could move down onto his soul mate's neck. The T-shirt Draco was wearing stretched down across his shoulder as Harry pulled on it, revealing enticing, pale flesh. Not worried that they were sitting on the floor Harry pushed his lover backwards and carefully lowered him to the ground, covering Draco's body with his own.

[Harry,] even Draco's mental voice sounded breathless as Harry went about showing his soul mate just how much he loved and desired him.

[Hmm,] Harry was not really paying any attention except to what he was doing.

[The door's still open,] Draco pointed out, but did not move to try and stop his lover.

From the outside the door had a temporary illusion on it so that it would appear closed to any casual observers. The illusion, however, would not work on those who knew it was there, so Madame Pomfrey could see through it to check on them in case anything went wrong. Even in his current state of arousal, Harry wasn't ready to put on a show for anyone, but he really didn't want to stop. Part of his mind decided that the door needed to be closed; the rest was completely focused on exciting his lover. He was considering moving and actually closing the door when a slam startled him out of what he was doing and he sat up and turned in shock.

For a moment Harry stared at the door and then looked back at Draco, who was leaning up on his elbows also looking at the entrance to their room.

[Harry,] his soul mate said calmly, [did you do that?]

[Um,] Harry replied, [I, ah, that is, um.]

He searched his mind for the last few seconds and there was only one conclusion.

[Yes,] he said eventually.

Harry wasn't sure how he had done it, but examining his memory he had to admit that it had been him.

[We really should figure out how you did that,] Draco said in a responsible tone as he gazed into Harry's eyes steadily.

He almost gave in then, recognising the sense in Draco's words, but his hormones were still calling. For a moment Harry teetered on the brink of pulling away and doing the sensible thing and then desire took over.

[Later,] he said shortly and leant forward again.

Harry felt his lover give in as lust warred with common sense and Draco did not resist as he pushed him back to the floor. It wasn't as if they were going anywhere, after all.

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Hermione banished the pillow from the bed so that it landed in the corner and Harry couldn't help himself, he grinned.

"I think I almost have the hang of this," he said cheerfully. "I noticed that, but it didn't bother me."

"I think you're always going to notice when someone does magic," she said sagely.

"Yeah, it's part of the job description," Ron joked from where he was sitting on the bed.

Harry looked to Draco where his soul mate was standing in the corner viewing him critically. Eventually his lover smiled slightly and pushed himself away from the wall.

"You'll do," Draco said and walked towards him.

They had been testing what Harry could and could not put up with for the last hour and a half and so far he appeared to have very few adverse reactions. He had not been very comfortable when Hermione and Ron had a very short, very carefully controlled duel with a select repertoire of spells, but Harry did not think it had been too bad. It was almost second nature to feel the magic those around him were using in such a direct way and Hermione only managed to startle him once.

"Maybe we should hex you and see what happens," Ron was in a very cheerful mood and he grinned impishly at Harry.

Harry was going to comment and grin back, but a wave of fury from Draco stopped anything else he was thinking. He glanced at his soul mate quickly and was quite shocked by the scowl he saw on his Draco's face.

"Don't you ever suggest anything like that ever again," the Slytherin's voice was dangerously low and anger was coming off him in waves.

Ron appeared surprised and aghast at Draco's reaction and didn't seem to know what to do. The glare that Draco was sending at him could have killed. Harry moved before he considered what he was going to do and he pulled his lover into an embrace.

[It's okay, Love,] he said firmly as he felt Draco actually shaking with tension, [it was only a joke. No one is going to hurt me.]

Even with Harry radiating an air of relaxation and safety it took a good few seconds for his soul mate to begin to calm down and then Draco pulled away.

"Bloody hell," the blond youth swore at himself, "I can't believe I did it again."

"You didn't go for your wand this time," Harry pointed out in the hope that looking on the bright side might cheer up his lover.

Draco looked quite uncomfortable and he could do little to help his soul mate except offer his support.

"I take it this isn't an isolated incident," Hermione entered the conversation.

"No it isn't," Draco replied, clearly annoyed with his reaction. "Sorry Weasley," he apologised much to Ron's surprise, "I tend to over react when anything threatens Harry."

"No worries," Ron replied in a surprisingly supportive tone, "I know all about flying off the handle. I think all of mum's offspring come with a lit fuse from birth, so you're talking to an expert."

Harry sent his friend a grateful smile: this was so much easier with people around who empathised.

"I can insult you all evening if you need some anger management practice," Ron offered with an innocent expression.

That managed to draw a small grin from Draco.

"Thanks for the offer, Weasley," was the smooth response, "but it's Harry you have to insult, threaten or otherwise abuse to get me riled and I think we can both live without that tonight."

Ron smiled broadly and twirled his wand in his fingers.

"You're just no fun anymore," he commented which made Harry laugh and Draco roll his eyes.

"Gryffindors," was the Slytherin's opinion, "can't please them when you stop insulting them, aren't allowed to kill them in a slow and painful manner."

Harry gave his lover a peck on the cheek as Draco grumbled light-heartedly and he headed over to the summoning alcove.

"Anyone fancy some food?" he asked cheerfully as his stomach growled. "All this magic has given me an appetite."

Ron looked terribly interested in the idea, much to Hermione's disgust.

"You only ate an hour ago, Ron," she pointed out incredulously as Harry began to request some sandwiches and some drinks.

"I'm a growing boy," Ron protested lightly.

"Grow any more and you'll been keeping goal while standing on the ground," Draco commented, much to Harry's amusement.

"Hey, I thought we weren't doing the insults," Ron shot back with a mock hurt expression.

"If you were paying attention," the Slytherin said in his most superior tone, "I said we weren't insulting Harry, but if you think you're man enough, we can play with swapping a few."

It pleased Harry no end that his lover's earlier anger seemed to have evaporated completely. They were going to have to work harder to curb Draco's instinctive protectiveness, but at least it appeared to have no lasting effects this time. As Ron and Draco launched into a round of surprisingly light-hearted insults, Harry cheerfully requested enough food to feed an army.

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Draco swatted Harry's hand away from the Gryffindor's mouth where he was biting his thumbnail nervously.

"You grew out of that when you were fifteen," his soul mate pointed out as Harry glared at him moodily, "you're not starting it again now."

"I'm nervous," Harry protested, but left his hand by his side never-the-less. From the look in Draco's eyes he knew that rebelling just then would be a bad idea.

It wasn't just Harry who had a case of the jitters, he could feel the anxiety radiating off his lover as well. They had both agreed that they needed to do this and they'd been preparing all morning, but that didn't mean either of them would not have jumped at the chance of putting it off.

"Nervousness is no excuse for bad habits," Draco said pointedly and went back to pacing, which he had been doing for the last ten minutes.

They were about to step out of the room for the first time since their bonding and Harry was in no way trying to hide the fact that he was afraid. Yes he had sat by the door and practised with his barriers, but the wards were still around the rest of the room and so the forces he was shielding against had not been all-encompassing. Today they were going to step past the wards, although with safety in easy reach.

It was the middle of the day, just after lunch and Madame Pomfrey had cordoned off an area of the hospital wing. Draconigena Mumps had been a very well thought out cover story since it made the sufferer very sensitive to physical contact and very sensitive to magic as well, so if anyone caught a glimpse of what was going on it could be explained away. Precautions had been taken to ensure that it was highly unlikely that anything would reach the rest of the school, but in Hogwarts it always did to be doubly careful. The screens would make sure no one saw anything specific even if they happened to walk in, but with the disease in question the activity of acclimatising the victims back to normal life was valid.

"I feel like I'm about to face Voldemort, do my N.E.W.T.s and walk naked into the Great Hall all at the same time," Harry said mournfully.

It was ridiculous, all he was doing was stepping out of the room for heaven's sake and yet it was almost as if it was the hardest thing he had ever done. Draco looked at him with one eyebrow raised and slowly smiled.

"Now that's an interesting mental image," he commented wryly.

The amusement that was running through his lover was contagious and Harry found his own lips quirking slightly. It did little to dismiss his attack of nerves, but at least it lightened the atmosphere. Or at least it lightened the atmosphere until he heard a key in the lock, at which point his attention flicked firmly back to the situation at hand.

[If you need to come back in here at any time just do it,] Draco said supportively, moving to his lover's side. [No Gryffindor heroics, I do not want you in a heap.]

[No problem,] Harry said honestly, [if it's too much you won't see me for dust.]

"Ready, Gentlemen?" Madame Pomfrey asked calmly as she pushed the door back against the wall.

"As we'll ever be," Harry said and gave her the best smile he could manage.

Giving the barriers in his mind a last mental inspection Harry took Draco's hand and stepped towards the opening. He could already feel the magic that ran though every stone of Hogwarts thanks to the open door, but it was only as he stepped out of the protection of the room that he realised how much he was still shielded. Draco's presence intensified in his mind as the pressure on Harry's mental barriers increased and the young man had to pause to adjust. For a

moment he stood very still and let his thoughts and body catch up with the changes in his environment.

[Okay?] Draco asked a little anxiously.

[Yes,] Harry replied as he took a deep, steadying breath, [so far so good.]

"The screens are charmed to prevent anyone entering but myself," Madame Pomfrey told them efficiently, "and there is also a silencing charm active over them. If you need anything touch this screen here," the healer indicated a spot on the nearest barrier, "and I will be alerted. You have all afternoon to acclimatise yourselves, but please do not over tax your systems."

Harry nodded in understanding, as did his companion and then with a slight smile Madame Pomfrey turned and left. Behind the screens just outside the door was a table, two chairs, a chess set and a pack of playing cards: the healer had done her best to make them feel comfortable.

When he held his barriers in place normally it was quite easy, but the more magic there was surrounding him, the harder Harry had to concentrate, which was the tiring part. He knew it was becoming easier the more he did it and Harry assumed that it was like exercising a physical muscle: the more he did with his abilities the more robust they became. Since Hecatemae had functioned perfectly normally in the world before him, Harry knew it was possible that one day he would not even have to think about his mental barriers, but so far it was still taxing.

"Let's sit down," Draco suggested as he surveyed the area.

His soul mate did not let go of Harry's hand and he let himself be led to the table.

"It's so big," he said as he tried to come to terms with what he was feeling.

Draco looked at him questioningly; it was obvious that his lover was not following.

"What's so big?" he asked curiously.

"The world," Harry said and slowly sank in to the nearest chair. "I mean I've always known the world was a big place, but I've never felt it before. It's incredible and terrifying at the same time."

[Show me,] Draco requested gently, and rather than moving to his own chair, walked to stand behind Harry.

He was still holding onto Draco's hand but his soul mate ran his free hand through the Harry's hair. He relaxed into the sensation and shared what he was experiencing with his soul mate. They stayed completely still for some time. Eventually Draco shifted and looked Harry directly in the eye, his expression somewhere between wonder and amazement.

"I never imagined," his lover said quietly, "you really are connected to everything."

"We're connected to everything," Harry corrected gently, trying to assimilate the enormity of what he was feeling at the same time. "I think I finally understand about the 'going mad' references; without you right here I think my brain would try and go off in a hundred directions at the same time."

Draco did not reply in words, but the feeling of love and support coming from him intensified for a moment, enfolding Harry in a blanket of security and well being. As the other wizard moved to sit down Harry was consumed by thankfulness that the universe had seen fit to give him Draco Malfoy as a soul mate.

Harry managed to concentrate through one game of chess before thinking so hard and keeping his barriers in place at the same became too much. He then lasted another hour watching Draco play solitaire with the cards before he decided to call it quits.

[Headache too much?] his lover asked supportively when Harry finally looked longingly at the door to their room.

Harry nodded slowly: the pounding behind his eyes was a little over powering.

[It's getting easier the longer I stay, but I think I've had enough for now,] he admitted defeat gratefully.

Draco put the cards he was holding on the table straight away and stood up to move to him. They had been sitting without touching for most of their time outside and Harry accepted his lover's hand with relief. It was so much easier to maintain everything with Draco's strong presence as close as possible. The headache diminished almost instantly, but it did not vanish completely and Harry climbed to his feet slowly.

"Let's get you lying down," Draco said protectively, "and then I'll see what Madame Pomfrey can do for you."

He was not about to argue and Harry let himself be led back into their safe haven. He knew he had had enough for one afternoon, but he was a little disappointed that he hadn't been able to stay out longer. They only had five days left and Harry had hoped for better.

[I know what you're thinking,] Draco commented as they made their way to the bed, [and that was good for a first try, so don't go telling yourself it wasn't. Remember the difference from the first time someone did magic in here and the second? By tomorrow that peculiar brain of yours will have it worked out much better and you'll be able to stay out much longer.]

His soul mate sounded so confident and Harry gave him a grateful smile.

[I hope you're right,] he replied and sat down on the mattress.

[I'm always right,] Draco replied with a grin and then having seen Harry to safety he disappeared outside again to summon Madame Pomfrey.

Harry kicked off his shoes and lay down; at least it had not been as bad as his lurid imagination had decided it would be.

Chapter 11 Through the Wards

It was the morning of the 31st and Harry was doing his best not to panic. It was not until he and Draco had climbed out of bed and gone through their normal morning routine that it actually hit him that today was the day he would be stepping into the real world for the first time since his change. Adding that to the fact that he would also be separated from Draco for a significant amount of time, made Harry less than happy about the date.

They had prepared as much as they possibly could, but he knew there were situations that could not be predicted and the task seemed incredibly daunting. Draco was not feeling particularly happy either, but the Slytherin was skilled in controlling his reactions and he seemed to be handling it much better than Harry felt he was.

"I don't want to leave," Harry said eventually as he pulled his clothes from the wardrobe. "I wish we could stay here, safe, and never have to go out there."

Draco turned from where he was piling up the books they had acquired over their stay and gave Harry a small sad smile.

"I know what you mean," he replied in kind, "but since we're on the subject of impossible things, I think I wish Voldemort and all his followers would suddenly discover death in the nastiest fashion possible."

"Well maybe not all of them," Harry decided that he mostly agreed, "but otherwise I'm with you."

He tried to use the black humour to lighten his mood, but it did not work. He had been outside the room every day since the first try and he could interact almost normally with the environment out there now, but it was not easy. They had even been through the same motions of testing his reactions to magic on the other side of the wards, behind the screens; Hermione and Ron had assisted as they had done inside the room, and Harry knew he could cope, but he was not looking forward to it. Thanks to the cover story the Gryffindor would have at least a couple of weeks before he would have to explain away any adverse reaction to magic, which was about the only good thing about the whole situation Harry could think of.

"This room will always be here for us," Draco said, calmly observing him from beside the table. "We can come here when we need to, and we know a good few dark corners we can disappear into."

That at least made Harry smile genuinely.

"After the last couple of months I think we've found every nook and trysting site there is around here," he said as the memories of the last weeks before they bonded came back to him.

It was difficult to believe it had only been two months since he had first accosted Draco in a corridor and offered his hand in friendship. It was like looking back to a past that wasn't quite his and it was almost as if Harry could not conceive that a world without his soul mate was real.

"It feels like we've been together forever," he said quietly. "It's hard to remember how it felt not to have you here."

At that Draco discarded what he was doing and walked towards his lover, barely pausing before placing a kiss on the Harry's lips. The touch said everything, but his soul mate sent a deep feeling of love with the gesture and Harry knew Draco felt the same way.

"Nothing will ever divide us," Draco said in little more than a whisper. "Out there we have to pretend," his soul mate looked directly into Harry's eyes, [but in here we will never be apart.]

The words were meant as a comfort, but they caused rather an adverse reaction in Harry.

[I've dragged you into danger,] suddenly all the guilt of pulling Draco into his perilous world reached up to engulf Harry.

Being with Draco felt so right that Harry's thoughts had never dwelt on the whole situation being his fault before, but now that the time had come to return to the world it hit him full force. This was because of him; Draco was in danger because of him; his soul mate would be a target if anyone so much as suspected the truth.

[Stop, love,] Draco's calm, mental voice brought Harry's racing thoughts to a halt, [this is not your fault. You are as meant for me as I am meant for you. We chose this, both of us. If this had been wrong for me I would have said no; you know me far too well not to realise that. I need you as much as you need me; remember that.]

Before they bonded Harry might have tried to deny his lover's words, but when Draco chose to make him see the truth it was impossible to not at least listen. The guilt did not evaporate completely, but it slowly dissipated until it was back to a simple idea and Harry pulled Draco him.

[I'm sorry,] Harry said while holding his lover close, [I'm not handling this very well.]

[Bunkum,] Draco said pointedly, [you're handling it as well as can be expected. This is huge, Harry, and you're coping, so don't worry about it.]

The Slytherin was in lecture mode and it made Harry smile again. When he wanted to be Draco was formidable. The universe couldn't really have come up with a better matched pair: Harry was prone to guilt; it was something that was part of his nature; Draco was much more likely to side with self preservation and keeping an eye out for his own interests. They balanced each other; made the other complete without the extremes of character they both possessed overcoming either of them. Harry felt himself calming down as he held his soul mate and although he could not say he was confident, the overwhelming fear that had been threatening dimmed to manageable levels.

To keep Draco safe Harry would do anything, up to and including laying down his life. The task ahead of them seemed far more difficult than sacrificing himself for his lover, but Harry pulled his courage together and built up his mental shields.

"Thank you," he said earnestly when he finally felt ready to release his soul mate, "I needed that."

Draco smiled at him and his companion's grey eyes almost twinkled.

"So did I," Draco admitted before turning back to the task in hand.

Harry surveyed the room as his lover returned to piling up the books they had been using over the past couple of weeks. There were their school textbooks, some recreational books and two volumes on Hecatemae that Dumbledore had sent through. It seemed that those who had written about the kind of wizard Harry was were not the most entertaining of writers, but at least the books had had some general information. Neither tome had been particularly useful in their current situation, and Harry still didn't understand where he fitted in any more, but he had an idea of what to expect from his new powers. Not of course that knowing exactly how wizard society viewed Hecatemae would have helped since no one was going to know anyway.

With a sigh Harry returned to packing; it was incredible quite how much stuff the pair had accumulated in only two weeks. They would take some of their belongings with them when they left and the house elves would deal with the rest. Steeling himself for what was to come Harry resolutely began to check his mental barriers as he prepared to leave the safe haven.

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Walking out of the room was not too bad: Madame Pomfrey had left the screens up so that Harry would have time to adjust once he stepped through the door. Their respective sets of friends were waiting on the other side of the barriers and he was sure if it hadn't been for the silencing charm still on the screens he would have heard insults flying. Slowly he felt around himself, strengthening his mental barriers. Draco's presence in his mind strengthened for a moment to help, and then dimmed again as the pair shared a look.

[It's now or never I suppose,] Harry said silently, trying not to let his anxiety flow down their link.

[Take your time,] Draco replied and squeezed his hand, [they can wait. We don't go anywhere until you're absolutely ready.]

Harry smiled at his lover's firm tone and on impulse pulled Draco into a warm embrace. This was the last time they could openly show their feelings for each other and even though Madam Pomfrey was standing only a few feet away, Harry needed the last gesture with his soul mate.

[We can do this,] he said resolutely and drew back again.

Draco nodded in return but he did not speak. Looking into the calm grey eyes of his lover Harry let his finger's drop Draco's hand. Without the physical contact the strain on Harry to keep his mental barriers in place increased, but it was only slight. Now was not what he was worried about: when they had been out of contact for a few hours, that would be the time things would become interesting.

[If you need me just call,] Draco said firmly. [Cover or no cover, if this is going to fail I don't want you taking the fall.]

[It won't come to that,] Harry replied as confidently as he could manage.

Before he could decide that this was a really bad idea he turned towards Madam Pomfrey and gave her a slight nod.

"We're ready," he said in a quiet voice and took a step away from his soul mate.

All his instincts screamed that moving away from Draco was the stupidest thing he could ever think of doing, but the logical voice that told Harry this was the only way to keep his soul mate safe overrode the natural impulses. The school healer moved to the screens and calmly pulled one back from the others, making a gap to the outside world. She stepped through it and positioned herself to the right of the opening.

"You first, Mr Malfoy," she said in a cold tone she usually reserved for pupils who had been difficult.

Draco had a reputation as a terrible patient and his housemates would expect the reaction. As Harry watched, the open, calm expression he had become used to on his lover's face morphed into the cold, calculating sneer the Gryffindor remembered from years past. The mask Draco was capable of creating was really quite frightening: he almost looked like a different person to Harry. If it hadn't been for the fact that he could still feel his lover he might have thought he was looking at the old Malfoy.

"Your friends are to the left," Madam Pomfrey said efficiently as the Slytherin walked through the gap.

Just before Draco disappeared from sight he turned and smiled coldly at Harry.

"Bye, Potter," he said with a sneer in his voice, "let's never do this again."

This was greeted by sniggers from behind the screens where the silencing charm had been breached. Harry should really have had a come back for that, but he couldn't muster the ability to fake insults. When Draco looked away and walked to his housemates out of sight Harry felt somehow bereft. This was the first time since they had bonded that Harry had been properly separated from his soul mate and it felt terrible. Taking a deep breath he tried to squelch the feeling of desolation and abandonment that threatened to take over even though consciously he knew this had to happen.

"Remember, Mr Malfoy," Madame Pomfrey said loudly, "avoid physical contact for at least a week unless you wish to be in some discomfort. Miss Parkinson remove that hand, now."

It was another aspect of the cover story that worked well for them: Draconigena Mumps left its victims sensitive to contact with anyone magical for some time. This gave Harry a reason not to allow anyone to touch him and once his housemates were used to the idea he hoped he could keep it going unobtrusively.

Repeating the mantra that he could do this to himself, Harry walked towards the opening in the screens where Madam Pomfrey had changed sides.

"The Gryffindors are to the right, Mr Potter," the healer said in a much softer tone, "you may wait with them while I dispatch the Slytherins."

Harry smiled his thanks and then stepped through the last barrier between his sanctuary and the rest of the world. Ron, Hermione and Neville were all waiting for him and although he felt naked and exposed at leaving his safe world behind, he smiled at them and tried to appear pleased to be free. After all, being let out in time for the Halloween feast should have been something to celebrate.

"Hi, guys," Harry greeted as cheerfully as he could manage, "thanks for coming."

"No problem, Mate," Ron said with a big grin, "some of the others wanted to come too, but Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let us all clutter up her hospital wing."

Harry nodded in understanding and resisted the urge to reach out and touch his friend. He had been quite a tactile person and that instinct still came through.

"Harry," Neville said with a slightly worried catch to his voice, "are you sure you're okay, you look very pale."

It was just like the slightly rotund Gryffindor to pick up that another was in distress, and Harry appreciated the concern even if it might turn out to be problematic.

"I'm fine," he said and beamed at his friend, employing Draco's careful coaching on how to lie to one's housemates. Outright lying to someone's face was not something Harry had ever been particularly good at, but his lover had drilled him in how to maintain the cover story. "It's just a bit of fatigue. Damn mumps didn't want to go away and the stuff we had to take was absolutely disgusting. Madam Pomfrey insisted on dosing us up before she'd let us leave and let's just say I'm glad I never have to take that stuff ever again. Should be fine by the feast, though."

"When we get you back to the tower you can have a lie down," Hermione said sensibly, "just to make sure you have enough energy to celebrate with the rest of us tonight."

Harry nodded: it was probably a good plan.

However, as with many a good plan, things did not progress smoothly. The four Gryffindors waited until the Slytherins were long gone and then the three friends formed a vague guard like pose around Harry and escorted him back to the common room. That was where the plan fell down.

Ever since his integrity had been so publicly restored at the end of his fifth year Harry had become popular within the house. Every one seemed to want to make sure he was okay and to commiserate with him about his isolation with the 'evil Slytherin git'. Before he could escape to his dorm Harry found himself sat by the fire with a mug of hot chocolate and offers for a game of chess, a game of exploding snap or a myriad of different conversation companions. Without being very rude there was no escape.

Only three hours later, flanked by Ron, did Harry finally manage to make it to the dormitory. After his friend closed the door he collapsed on his bed with a groan. His housemates understood that they weren't supposed to touch him, but Harry was beginning to realise quite how often people touched accidentally and it was wearing down his mental barriers. Only one person had touched him for a prolonged amount of time and that had been Lavender who managed to forget while she was telling him all about what he had been missing.

"This is a nightmare," he admitted honestly and stared at the ceiling, "I hope to god that it gets easier."

"Well the magic thing got better didn't it, Mate," Ron said with a confidence Harry wished he could mirror. "It'll probably just take you a couple of days to get used to it all."

Harry fervently hoped his friend was right: he couldn't imagine living like this for the rest of the year. He desperately wanted to open his mind and at least find Draco's mental presence, but that could be habit forming and Harry knew sooner or later someone would notice. Conscious mental contact with his lover was for emergencies only, but he had to fight not to open the connection fully.

"I just hope this doesn't turn out to be a really bad idea," Harry said rather dejectedly.

Chapter 12 A Bad Idea

Draco watched Harry out of the corner of his eye as he tried to play the role of indifferent Slytherin. His housemates had welcomed him back and were filling him in on all the gossip while commiserating with him about being cooped up in isolation with 'the idiot Potter'. Ignoring Harry was the most difficult thing he had ever done, especially since their first day outside the hospital wing had obviously taken its toll on his soul mate. Harry looked tired and he had winced several times at the casual brush touch of his friends, which meant he wasn't blocking enough.

They had agreed that their bond would remain at the unconscious level when they were in such public situations, but halfway through the feast Draco had had enough. He tentatively pushed at the barriers that kept their minds apart and they gave way instantly. Harry's mental presence was so relieved at the contact that Draco actually dropped his goblet at the sensations the link flooded through him.

[You look dreadful,] Draco mentally chided the other youth while trying to make a joke of the spillage with those sitting next to him.

[Please tell me I don't look as bad as I feel,] Harry returned and even his mental voice sounded tired.

Draco flashed him an image of what he looked like from across the room and Harry's mental presence shuddered.

[You're overloading aren't you,] he returned silently.

There was a non-committal reply down the link, but Draco really didn't need the clarification: the situation was obvious. Without direct physical contact with him Harry had to do most of his shielding himself; he was nowhere near ready to do that for long periods of time. The bond between them shouldered some of the burden, but neither of them had had enough practice to be separated for long. Draco knew he was feeling agitated at the separation and he had no doubt it was worse for Harry, although his soul mate was doing his best to shield how he was feeling. Ron and Hermione were trying their hardest to physically protect their friend from the other Gryffindors, but this was a feast after all.

[We need to get you somewhere quiet,] Draco said as he glanced over surreptitiously.

[And bang goes your cover,] Harry shot back, sounding a little annoyed at the suggestion.

[I don't give a rat's arse about my cover if it means you're suffering like that,] he replied pointedly. [Staying on this side of the room is a bloody nightmare. This isn't going to work.]

[I'll manage,] his soul mate replied, but Harry's tone was less than certain.

[Who's the protector in this relationship?] Draco asked petulantly. [I have almost decked Goyle twice this evening already because of things he said about you and now you won't listen to sense.]

[We have to get through this,] Harry told him tiredly. [If we can do this we can do anything.]

From the safety of their room in the hospital wing this had seemed like an almost workable idea, now, in practice, Draco was sure it was doomed to failure. Trying to hide something like a Hecatemus bond was a recipe for madness and that they had managed it all day was looking more like a miracle every second.

[I love you, but your stubbornness is annoying,] Draco said succinctly.

[What do you expect, I'm a Gryffindor,] came the weary reply.

It was then that Neville Longbottom walked up behind Harry and cheerfully leant on his shoulder, obviously forgetting completely about the no touching rule. Draco felt the spike of disorientation go through Harry as he was swamped by the other boy's emotions. At least one of Harry's shields shattered at the mental impact and overwhelming input flooded into the Hecatemus' mind. As far as Draco was concerned the debate was over.

"Crap, I can't do this," he said pointedly, much to his housemates' surprise, and stood up.

He was about to climb out from the bench and skirt his way round to Harry when the cutlery in front of his lover began to shake.

"Shit," was Draco's distinct opinion on the situation.

Harry's barrier against the magic in the room was the one that had gone and Draco could feel that his soul mate had inadvertently tapped into the power around him. That, according to the books, and a couple of minor experiences, meant random things were likely to happen, which could result in no more than the cutlery moving a bit, up to and not excluding a demon popping into the hall for dinner. Without pausing to consider the ramifications of what he was about to do Draco stepped onto the bench and then onto the table.

"Longbottom, get your hand off him now!" he really didn't care what anyone would deduce from that comment.

The tone he used must have been particularly scary because the Gryffindor in question jumped back like he had been hit. Harry would probably make Draco apologise for terrifying the boy later, but he couldn't give two hoots about that at the moment.

"Coming through," he said loudly to the next table and then ran one step to the edge of the Slytherin table and jumped.

He landed in the middle of the Ravenclaw's seventh years and then hopped down off the other side of the table. Everyone was watching him open mouthed, but Draco only cared about one thing and that was getting to Harry. He could feel that his lover was trying to rebuild his mental shield, but there was too much interference in the room. Ron and Hermione had moved to stand as far away from Harry as they could get and still remain between him and the other Gryffindors and Draco nodded to them both. Then, much to the astonishment of most of the Great Hall if the gasps were anything to go by, Draco Malfoy wrapped his arms around Harry Potter.

The shaking cutlery had spread to the next few place settings and as Draco connected with Harry he could see it from his soul mate's point of view. There was a well of power just in front of the Hecatemus that had been attracted to him

the moment his shield smashed and it was slowly spreading to touch things. It was actually quite an intoxicating sight: magic in its pure form was very much like a drug and it called to the wizard in Draco. He pointedly ignored the siren's song and lent his strength to Harry's struggling mind.

"Put it back," he whispered quietly without the slightest concern for who was watching.

Harry was staring ahead and breathing hard: he was struggling to control the raw power and put back the barrier that stopped it running rampant. He should have been trained to cope with something like this from childhood as it was he had a couple of weeks practice and a stubborn streak the size of a dragon. Draco funnelled his levelling influence into the turmoil that was Harry's mind and put himself between the other boy and the magic. He could not cut out everything but his partial barrier gave Harry the respite to rebuild his own.

Putting the mental shield back from nothing was not like building a wall it was rather like the rest of magic: it either happened or it didn't. With Draco connected to him and placing himself in the middle of everything Harry's focus came back and the cutlery stopped shaking as fast as it had begun. Draco could feel that his lover's mental barriers were battered, but they were no longer broken. On a physical level Harry was shaking like a leaf.

Draco opened his eyes to find that he was surrounded and as he looked at the circle of Gryffindors behind him several of the stares were hostile. Ron and Hermione were holding back the tide, but they were obviously unsure of how to handle the situation.

"Come on," Draco said gently in Harry's ear, "we need to get you out of here."

Harry was once more lucid, but he was exhausted and Draco moved his arms to help his lover stand up. As the shattered Gryffindor's trouble became apparent to his house mates several of those standing behind them glaring moved to help.

"Touch him and I fry you," Draco snapped before anyone could get close. "Back off."

That earned him even more glares and for a moment he thought he might have to back up his threat. He was saved by Dumbledore's even tones.

"Please do as Mr Malfoy requests," the headmaster said calmly much to the astonishment of the Gryffindors. "The situation is far more complex than it appears and Mr Potter is quite safe within his care. No one except Mr Malfoy is to touch Mr Potter in any way, is that understood?"

Draco took the opportunity to help Harry to his feet and then rather than making Harry try and climb over the bench Ron orchestrated its removal. Draping the other wizard's arm across his shoulders Draco then firmly gripped Harry around the waist and made sure he was ready to support his lover should he require it. That left just one obstacle: the wall of Gryffindors between the two young men and the exit.

"Move," Draco said pointedly not really thinking about anything more than making sure Harry made it back to the room they had so recently vacated as quickly as possible.

[Please,] Harry said silently.

"Please," the Slytherin added and shocked most of those in his way so much that they actually obeyed without comment.

Draco knew that Hermione and Ron were shadowing them as they made their way out of the hall and it was only as the four made it through the door that the room exploded with sound.

"Cat, bag, out of," Ron said succinctly.

"Maybe we should take out an ad in the Prophet just to make sure," Draco commented dryly.

"They don't know what was really going on," Hermione pointed out optimistically, "we might be able to convince then that you're both under the influence of something."

Draco gave her a sideways look that said exactly what he thought of that cheery idea.

"With all the information we just gave them," he said acidly, "if the Slytherin's haven't figured out the truth by tomorrow morning my house pride will be severely dented."

Being bonded to Harry had not diminished Draco's talent for getting under people's skin and he was rewarded for his sharp tone with a glare that could have frozen water. The Slytherin was in a mood for a good argument since he was annoyed and thoroughly pissed off and he hoped Hermione would give him a run for his money. Draco was of the opinion that if the Gryffindors looked on an argument for its entertainment value as much as he did, they would not be nearly as stuffy as they always appeared to him.

"Touch him and I fry you," the quiet comment came from Harry: the first audible one he had made since his breakdown, and he sounded amused.

"What?" Draco asked immediately forgetting about the other two and focussing solely on his partner.

"Bit melodramatic," his lover said lightly.

"I'm a Malfoy," Draco returned evenly, "it's in my genes to be melodramatic. And you're a one to talk, Wonder Boy, ever considered letting someone else handle the bad guy?"

They bickered all the way back to their room.

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The next afternoon Harry was recovered enough to answer Dumbledore's summons to his study, but he did not fail to notice that Draco was glued to his side. He felt like such an idiot after the previous day's performance, but he was very glad to have his lover close. They received several curious glances on their way through the halls, but no one chose to question them.

"Tea, boys?" the headmaster offered once he had them sitting in front of his desk.

[How much of the stuff does he drink?] was Draco's mental comment on the offer. [There is only so much tea any one human being should be able to take.]

"No thank you," Harry said, answering for both of them, "we just had lunch."

"Well I hope you don't mind if I indulge," Dumbledore said with a smile, "I find it helps me think."

[The way it tastes half the time it could wake the dead, a few brain cells must be easy,] Draco said cheerfully.

Harry tried very hard not to smile.

"To our problem then," the headmaster said calmly and relaxed back into his chair.

Harry sobered immediately.

"We blew it," he said pointedly.

"It would appear that the majority of the school is now aware of the relationship between the pair of you," Dumbledore admitted evenly, "and that there is something unusual about you, Harry. However, most are still ignorant of the facts as to the truth of the relationship."

"It only requires one," Draco pointed out, "and then the whole school will know. It might be better to pre-empt the rumour mill."

Harry turned to stare at Draco: they had talked about possible solutions to the current situation, but he was very sure they had not decided that.

"And put a huge target on you back?" he protested rapidly. "No way!"

"Harry, I know you were busy yesterday, but you may have noticed that I threw my arms around you in the Great Hall with the whole school in attendance," Draco said with his usual sarcasm. "We're beyond the debate stage. Even if we could convince them that I was crazy as a loon yesterday we'd be under a microscope after that and there's no way we can be apart for as long as it would take."

The need to protest was very strong in Harry and he was sure there had to be another way, but as Draco gently patted him on the hand no alternatives made it into his head.

"Headmaster," he appealed to the only other person in the room.

"I fear Draco may be correct," Dumbledore said regretfully. "I would prefer it if we could keep the true nature of your relationship a secret a while longer, but I am doubtful that it can be done."

Harry felt suddenly defeated. Admitting to what they were would not only set them apart in the school: there was no doubt that the information would go straight to Draco's father.

"What about Lucius?" Harry did not feel like beating about the bush. "The whole point was to stop him finding out: he's not going to like this."

"Harry is correct, Professor," Draco said far more calmly than Harry was feeling, "my father is likely to try something even if he is technically a fugitive. My mother will not defy him and we could never prove she is in contact with him. I won't be seventeen for another two months, she may try and take me out of school."

At that Dumbledore actually smiled.

"Ah yes, Draco, I sometimes forget you are one of the youngest in your year. I was most surprised when you were called to Hogwarts in Harry's year given your birthday, but now I see that the book had certain other considerations when it sent out your invitation," the headmaster said cheerfully and then appeared to realise he was rambling. "However, on the point of your majority and what your parents can demand we have the law on our side. To separate Hecatemae bond mates against their will is illegal regardless of age. Your family no longer has a hold over you, Draco, except the financial one."

"That's covered," Harry said before he even thought about it and then his brain made it to the questions he wanted to ask. "Why? How?"

The way Dumbledore looked pleased with himself Harry suspected that the old man had been waiting to spring that piece of information on them.

"Hecatemae are unique in wizardkind," the headmaster said lightly, "and it was decided centuries ago that they could not be held to the same restrictions as normal partners. A Hecatema instinctively knows their soul mate, and also instinctively knows when the time is right to bond with them. If the bond occurs before the age of maturity for either chooser or chosen it is considered the step into adulthood: it overrules all ties including those of blood. Whatever may have been agreed in the past, even magical contracts no longer apply. Hecatemae law is actually a fascinating subject: I have had several books looked out you might wish to read."

Looking at Dumbledore at that moment, Harry came to a conclusion and so did his soul mate.

[He never expected us to keep this a secret,] Draco's mental voice sounded a little awed. [He knew. But he came up with the whole cover story and... and...]

[Dumbledore always knows. He doesn't always do things at the right time but he always knows,] was all Harry could think of the say, [I thought I'd given up being surprised, I was wrong.]

"Which brings us back to your school careers," the headmaster continued as if he didn't know the two young men were talking to each other, which Harry was positive he did. "As with wizarding law there are exceptions to school rules for the two of you as well. Technically being caught sleeping with your fellow pupils is an expulsion offence at Hogwarts even for those of age."

Harry had been wondering about that one since the moment he had woken up, but he had not had the guts to ask about it. There were several older pupils who were sexually active, but it was most definitely against school rules. No one had been expelled for it in living memory, but there had been some historic suspensions in the past.

"In your case there was probably nothing the pair of you could have done to stop it," Dumbledore continued as if he was talking about something completely normal. "The school discovered that one approximately eight hundred years ago."

The question of how was at the forefront of Harry's mind, but he was not sure he really wanted to discus this with the headmaster; Draco on the other hand was not so backward.

"How on earth did they do that?" he asked curiously.

[Don't you find this in the least bit embarrassing?] Harry could feel his own cheeks burning at the thought of what they had done and every one knew they had done.

[Nowhere near as embarrassing as running through the halls in my pyjamas blathering your name,] Draco returned flippantly.

"There have been twelve Hecatemae at Hogwarts in its history," the headmaster said cheerfully, "and six of them have bonded during their time here: four on school grounds. The first was Amelia Wilberforce and she did not meet her soul mate until after she entered the wider world, the second was Carmen Londres and she did. When it was time for her to complete the bond the staff at the time attempted to stop her by separating the two forcefully. They were locked in their respective house towers in the belief that Carmen would come to her senses."

"What did she do?" Harry found himself asking the question and blushing at the same time.

"She apparated without the aid of a wand and without the aid of ever having been taught how, through the school wards from the room in which she was locked into the room holding Justin Woodward and completed what she had started," Dumbledore continued happily. "The headmaster at the time was sensible enough to realise that certain rules were not applicable in certain situations."

Harry was pretty sure he was scarlet by now, but there were some questions that were bothering him. When the whole plan had been to keep everything secret they had been moot, but now they needed answering.

"What about after the bonding?" he asked, trying not sound as embarrassed as he was.

[Can't keep your hands off me, Potter?] Draco said seductively.

[Shut up, Malfoy,] Harry returned trying to banish the thoughts the comment brought into his head.

The fact was Harry was not sure he could keep his hands off Draco, at least not for more than a couple of days. Dumbledore smiled at the pair of them and Harry found that is was possible for him to blush even harder.

"Arrangements will be made for you to have your own room," the headmaster said calmly. "The only question remaining is where. Both Slytherin and Gryffindor have a room available and you have a choice as to which you will take."

Harry looked at Draco who looked back. He knew where he would choose to be if left to decide himself, but he did not want to alienate Draco any further from his house. If Draco chose to stay with his peers Harry would stay with him.

[I'll go where you want to go,] he said silently and his lover actually smiled.

[You're just so completely noble, aren't you?] Draco sounded amused and turned back to the headmaster.

"Gryffindor," he said calmly, "Slytherin would not be safe for Harry. If there are Death Eaters anywhere in the school they're among my compatriots. Thinking about it, it wouldn't be safe for me either. At least I don't think any of the Gryffindors will try and kill me, but it might be a good idea to put a ward on the door just in case."

His tone was light hearted, but Harry could feel the turmoil the decision was actually causing in Draco. After all, the young Slytherin was walking away from everything he had known. Harry wrapped his lover in a mental hug and hoped it would help.

"Does that mean I will be a Gryffindor, or will I still be a Slytherin?" Draco asked eventually.

"That is up to you," Dumbledore said calmly, "both Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall have expressed their willingness to have you in their house."

Draco was silent for a few seconds and Harry chose not to intrude: this was after all a big decision.

"Then I'll finish school in the house in which I started it, thank you," Draco said eventually. "No offence, Harry, but I am so, so, so, not a Gryffindor."

Harry let out a snort of laughter at that, having conjured up a mental image of Draco trying to be the perfect Gryffindor. He shared it with his lover and the Slytherin grinned.

[My point exactly,] Draco commented dryly.

"And then there is the question of your N.E.W.T.s," Dumbledore changed the subject. "Since you are in constant communication you cannot be considered individuals as far as the exams are concerned. Before you say anything, Harry, I know you would not cheat, and I know you would not let Draco cheat either."

That earned the headmaster a genuine smile of amusement from the blond young man. Harry really enjoyed seeing his lover smile.

"But there are established rules for your situation," the headmaster continued. "You will both be awarded any exams you pass jointly. Special arrangements will be made for you to both be in the exam room for all written papers and practicals including any you do not share."

Both young men nodded, it seemed reasonable.

"And then to what I am afraid is the bad news," Dumbledore said slowly. "I'm terribly sorry but neither of you may play in competitive Quidditch."

The headmaster's words stabbed straight to Harry's heart and he went cold: it took him a moment to realise that Draco did not feel surprised. For a few seconds Harry felt as if Dumbledore had just pulled the rug from under him, but with his lover's mental support it slowly faded and he felt like an idiot. If he thought about it, it was obvious he couldn't play Quidditch anymore: after all he could see magic, finding the snitch would be child's play and Draco and him on different

teams would have been rather ridiculous. His lover appeared to have realised this before Dumbledore mentioned it.

"You may of course still coach which means Harry, you may remain Captain of your house team if you wish," the headmaster continued in a brighter tone, "and there is nothing to stop you playing in friendly games."

Harry gave the old wizard a half smile for trying, but it was still a blow to him. The ban in the fifth year had been difficult, but it had been unjust and he had been able to fight it, but this was irreversible. Quidditch was one of the things he most loved in the world and it was probably the thing he was best at.

[Except surviving impossible odds,] Draco commented dryly and Harry realised he had been thinking out loud.

"Harry, do you feel up to rejoining your lessons tomorrow?" Dumbledore had moved on yet again.

Harry nodded.

"Good," the headmaster continued, "we do not want you to lose out on your school work. The pair of you will attend class as normal. Since you will be awarded joint marks in the N.E.W.T.s you will take all your lessons together. Harry you are welcome to sit in on Draco's Arithmancy class if you wish. Which leaves us with only one more question: How do you wish to make known your position to the rest of the school?"

With that question Draco became a mass of conflict and Harry realised that although his lover had come to terms with the fact that the information would be released to the school, Draco had no clue as to how it should be done. On the other hand, Harry knew at least part of how he would prefer it to happen.

"I'd like to tell Gryffindor myself," he said quietly, "especially if we're going to be moving in."

"Then may I suggest that this be dealt with at a house level?" Dumbledore asked gently. "Would you care to bring the news to Slytherin, Draco?"

"No," the young man was very firm on that point, "I'd rather be in a different county when they find out the facts."

[You'll be with me,] Harry said silently and reached out his hand to Draco.

His soul mate took the comfort with a grateful smile. Together they could face anything, including a hoard of angry Slytherins, and Harry refused to believe anything else. The headmaster cleared his throat and snapped the Gryffindor's attention back to him.

"Which leaves just a few details to be discussed and this," the old man said kindly and placed a small badge on the desk in front of Harry.

The enamelled plaque had a large P on it: Harry was a little confused.

"I've been meaning to give you that for over a year, Harry," Dumbledore said openly, "but I have to admit to not being able to think of a reason without singling you out, which I know makes you uncomfortable. I should have made

you a prefect in your fifth year, but we both know that I made a mistake there. Now I have the perfect reason."

Harry was not quite following and he didn't know how to take the news.

"What reason?" he expressed his confusion.

"Hecatemae and their bond mates are considered equal in all things," the headmaster explained with a smile, "rank and privilege given to one must also be bestowed on the other as must any punishment or penalty. Draco is a prefect and hence Harry so are you."

Harry picked up the badge slowly: this was something he had not expected at all.

"Besides which," Dumbledore said cheerfully, "the school couldn't possibly expect you to use separate bathrooms."

Chapter 13 Explanations

The common room was pretty quiet when Harry opened the entrance even though there were at least fifteen people in it doing various things. The gentle chatter, however, went from a low companionable level to completely nothing when Harry stepped into the room. The young man had thinned his mental barriers slightly just in case and the room was awash with metallic silvers and golds, as well as a blue haze of shock. He had not yet pinned on his prefect's badge and he held it tightly in one hand using the sharp edges to distract him from how nervous he felt.

"Harry," Ron greeted in surprise and stood up from where he was playing chess with Neville, "we didn't expect you back yet."

Once again Harry was incredibly glad that he had a friend like Ron.

"We thought you'd like an explanation," was the only thing he could come up with to say in response to the question.

At that, someone disappeared up the stairs to the girls' rooms and someone disappeared up the stairs to the boys' rooms; Harry had no doubt every member of Gryffindor house in the tower would be in the room in seconds.

"We?" Ron really was a fantastic friend.

Harry looked over his shoulder at the shadowed, still open door.

[You're going to have to come in some time,] he said silently.

[I'd rather be drunk first,] Draco replied and did not even attempt to hide his nervousness.

[I won't let anyone curse you,] Harry said, trying to make light of the situation.

[Easy for you to say,] his lover shot back, [it hasn't been your mission in life to make every Gryffindor hate you.]

[Draco, please come in,] Harry gave up trying to be funny, [I love you and I want you here for this.]

Finally his soul mate appeared in the doorway and a disgruntled murmur went round the room, even Ron looked surprised.

"What's he doing here?" someone asked from the back of the room.

"He's with me," Harry said very firmly and fixed the speaker with a glare, "and he's going to be living upstairs so get used to the idea."

That brought a stunned silence to the entire assembly and several mouths were hanging open.

"Way to go breaking it to them gently, Harry," Draco commented sarcastically, "maybe you should tell them Voldemort will be joining us next."

"Draco, shut up," Harry said pointedly, "you're not helping."

It had become quite obvious even before Harry ended up in Draco's head that the Slytherin used sarcasm as a defence mechanism: right now it wasn't particularly useful.

"Since when have you two been on first name terms?" surprisingly it was Neville who spoke up.

"Oh we're on more than first..." Harry turned around and fixed Draco with a glare before his other half could finish his sentence.

"Will you please let me do this?" he said firmly and after a moment or so Draco nodded.

[Sorry,] came the mental apology.

[It's okay,] Harry replied in kind, [I'm scared too.]

At that moment Hermione came down the stairs with a couple of other girls.

"Harry, Draco," she greeted with surprise in her voice, "I heard, but I thought someone was pulling my leg."

[I wish,] Draco muttered in Harry's head.

"We came to explain," Harry said aloud.

"Oh," was Hermione's response, "good for you."

Then like the jewel she was she made her way across the room and placed herself right next to Draco pledging her support so that no one could mistake it.

"Okay, Harry," Colin Creevey said in a reasonable tone, "we're listening."

At the invitation all his prepared speeches fled and Harry was left feeling awkward and at a loss. Then Draco's fingers brushed his arm lightly and he tried to pull himself together.

"Ever heard of Hecatemae?" he finally started.

There were mostly blank stares looking back at him and a couple of faces that thought they knew, but didn't appear sure. Harry considered giving them the explanation as he saw it, but, since he had help, he decided to use it.

"Hermione, would you mind, you probably have it memorised?" he requested hopefully.

"No problem," she replied with a smile and then proceeded to rattle off the dictionary definition of exactly what a Hecatema was.

Some of the faces in the crowd looked no clearer when she had finished, but the majority had cottoned on.

"So how did you get mixed up with a Hecatema," one of the fourth years asked once Hermione had finished, "and what does it have to do with Malfoy."

"I didn't get mixed up with one," Harry said with a resigned sigh, "I'm a Hecatemus."

"Hecatema are all female," one bright spark put in and there were murmurs of agreement, "there's no such thing as a Hecatemus."

Hermione's definition had woken up a few memories.

"That's what everyone thought," Harry said honestly, "but someone forgot to mention it to me. Someone always forgets to mention these things to me."

[Maybe being gay counts,] Draco offered in his mind.

[You're the first male I've ever been attracted to,] Harry replied trying to figure out what to say next, [I'm not sure that makes me gay, I'll give you bi though.]

"So you can sense what we're feeling, and the raw magic and things like that?" another voice chipped in.

Harry nodded.

"Sort of," he admitted, not sure he could quite explain exactly what it was he could see. "I can put barriers up to stop it all or I'd end up crazier than I already am."

That earned him a little laugh from some of those that knew him well.

"And you needed a bond mate to help..." someone else started and then paused. "Oh my god, you're saying your soul mate is Malfoy?"

The room exploded with sound and Harry shoved his barriers up to full strength to keep out the emotions that began flying around. There was no way anyone could hear anything sensible with the number of questions soaring around the room. Draco moved closer to Harry and slipped his hand into his. It was Ron who came to the rescue with the rest of the room. His ginger haired friend climbed up onto the common room table and yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Quiet!"

The sound in the room fell to a gentle muttering.

"But Malfoy is a Death Eater," an anonymous voice said as a semblance of quiet fell.

"You're thinking of my father," was Draco's succinct reply.

"Draco has been on our side since the beginning of the year," Harry said pointedly, "which is why we attempted the charade at the feast yesterday. He's been our eyes in their camp since term started."

[You make me sound like a full-fledged spy,] Draco commented wryly.

Several of the older pupils were now looking at the Slytherin as if he had grown another head and Harry had to admit that if asked who would turn out to be a good guy a last year, Draco would not have even made the list.

"So you and he ..." someone began and then realised that there were youngsters in the room.

"Draco and I will be sharing what used to be the junk room above the seventh year dorms," Harry said calmly, saving the commentator from herself. "It was that or the Slytherin dungeon and both of us fancied living until the end of the year."

There was another titter of laughter from the younger members of the house, only the older ones knew that Harry's light tone belied the fact he was serious.

"Look, guys," Harry said as the laughter died, "I know this is strange, trust me it's even stranger from this angle, but I would really like not to have to stay in the hospital wing for the rest of the year."

There was muttering from around the room and Harry just prayed.

"Come on, Gryffindor," it was Seamus' voice that broke through the low rumble, "this is Harry Potter: he's saved our arses loads of times."

There was a moment's silence and then the room erupted in a distinct yes. Total astonishment came from Draco's direction when he found himself patted on the back by a Gryffindor he was sure he'd terrorised for at least three years.

[You are aware your housemates are insane,] he commented as Harry turned to him and beamed.

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There was of course one more group that needed to be told exactly what was going on, more so than the Gryffindors. As soon as the arrangements for Draco and Harry to move into the upper room had been made, Harry cast the charm on his galleon, which called all current members of the DA to a meeting. The information sent round to the other houses had been bare facts and Harry knew he was going to have some explaining to do. At eight thirty all twenty-five members of the DA arrived at the Room of Requirement.

There had been twenty-five original members and so it was that they had agreed that when they left school those leaving would find their own replacements. Hence the group remained the same size. Some of the faces in the crowd did not look at all happy to see Draco Malfoy upping their numbers.

"You shouldn't have brought him here," one unhappy voice stated as soon as the door closed.

Harry's eyes fixed on the fourth year Ravenclaw who had spoken and narrowed. The irrational anger that welled up in him was not exactly productive, but he was already on edge and he did not need the DA being openly hostile. Somehow this was entirely different than explaining to the Gryffindors: this felt more dangerous, possibly because every person in the room was technically just that little bit more lethal than their school friends.

"I know you all already know what I am," Harry said evenly, refusing to give an answer to his critic straight away, "but I thought you deserved a better explanation. The first thing I have to make clear is that what I know Draco knows. There is nothing I can do about that and I wouldn't even if I could. If you decide you can't handle that then I will leave."

"Draco Malfoy stands for everything we don't," it was Zacharius Smith who spoke up next and he appeared decidedly unhappy. "He'll sell us out to his father if he hasn't already."

Draco's hand gently rested on the small of Harry's back, which was the only thing that stopped the retort that jumped to his mind. Having a screaming match with any of the members of the DA would not be productive, but right about then it was what Harry wanted to do. He was tired, he was on edge and all he really wanted to do was go to bed.

"I am not now, nor have I ever been a Death Eater," Draco's voice was calm, cool and very firm. "If you ever meet Voldemort face to face you will understand my decision."

A twitch at the open use of the Dark Lord's name and a murmur went round the room at Draco's admission, but Smith did not look convinced. Harry continued to glare at the Hufflepuff in a very annoyed fashion. To prove his point Draco pulled back the sleeves of his uniform to show he was not marked.

"Draco came over to our side before anything started between me and him," Harry said, trying to make them understand. "I don't think I could make a move before he did. We weren't compatible until then."

Trying to explain instinctive reasoning was not easy and it was all he could do to make it sound half sensible. How could he tell them that things had to have been just right for his heritage to kick in, when he was not exactly sure what the criteria had been to begin with?

"How do we know it's not you who went over to them?" Zacharius did not appear to be in the mood to give up.

There were several retorts of outrage from the Gryffindors in the room, but some of the other pupils appeared to think Smith might have a point. Draco stepped past Harry as the Hecatemus warred with himself trying to stay calm. The young man had had one too many things to deal with today and he was realising that meeting with the DA tonight may not have been such a good idea. The Gryffindors had been so easy in comparison.

"You actually think The Boy Who Lived would side with Voldemort?" Draco asked pointedly and another convulsive shudder went round the room at the name. "Did you conveniently forget how many times Harry has stood against that madman? Which bit of the past six years did you miss?"

"People change," Smith replied coldly, "there was no attack last year; maybe that was because good old Harry was changing sides. Who knows what he'd do for his soul mate."

The way the Hufflepuff said 'soul mate' was not nice and Harry suddenly realised that this was not just about Death Eaters. Smith made it sound as if what Harry and Draco were to each other was a dirty word. It appeared Draco had come to the same conclusion because there was white-hot anger running through him that cut through Harry's emotions like a knife. It was obvious to Harry that his lover was furious and the tension in Draco's stance was obvious. The Slytherin's hands were clenched by his sides and Harry knew his soul mate really wanted to reach for his wand and teach the Hufflepuff a lesson.

This was not a prejudice Harry had yet had to face one on one. In the wizarding world choice of sexual partners was not really an issue, and being Hecatemus had removed any of the remaining possibility of stigma associated with Harry's choice in the minds of most wizards and witches. Zacharius' father was a Muggle and it appeared that he had instilled some of his Muggle prejudices in his son.

"He is the only pure thing I have ever known," Draco's voice was low and dangerous. "How dare you suggest otherwise."

There was righteous anger in his every word and several faces paled under his wrath.

"Nice try, Malfoy," Zacharius said pointedly, "How do we know you're not relaying everything to Voldemort right now?"

Harry wanted to strangle the little prat with his bare hands, but sat on the desire before his anger and Draco's could combine and get really out of hand.

"You're a danger to us all, Malfoy," Smith said with uncompromising certainty in his voice, "until we have decided this I think you should be out of the loop."

Then the Hufflepuff did something that drew an amazed gasp from the entire room: the youth had his wand already in his hand and he raised it and said one word: "Stupefacio."

Harry's world slowed down to an almost stop as the red flash lanced straight at Draco. His lover had no chance to defend himself and as the curse hit him Draco folded like a rag doll. There was total silence and Harry's already precarious control snapped. The sudden absence of Draco's conscious mind in his thoughts wiped every rational idea from the Hecatemus' brain and shock coursed through his system. For a moment he just stared at the crumpled heap that was his soul mate and then his barriers came crashing down.

There was no gap between thought and action as they became one in Harry and he swung his gaze up to look at the person who had thrown the curse. Magic leapt at him from around the room and Harry took hold of it, not even trying to control the power that it fed into the surrounding air. His hair and robe moved as the spirals of raw energy moved over the surface of his body.

"Oh Merlin," Harry caught the sound of someone speaking behind him but barely noticed; "someone revive Malfoy now."

The growl started low in his throat and it moved up through his larynx and out of his mouth, growing with every micro second. Then as he released it into the world he sent with it the power hovering around him and it had only one target. Zacharius Smith never stood a chance: his wand dropped uselessly from his hand as he flew bodily backwards and collided with the wall. The magic surrounded the Hufflepuff and Harry watched it swirl around the youth as the power pinned Smith to the wall like a fly on glue. Harry was completely focused and he wanted to make his enemy pay. He hardly noticed that he was walking towards his helpless captive, and the fact that there were other spells being cast in the room was irrelevant.

Harry reached out to take hold of Zacharius through the prison he had formed of the magic. He had no idea what he was going to do, but thinking was not high on his list of priorities at that moment.

[Harry, no!] Draco's voice sounded in his head and the Hecatemus froze.

His soul mate's inner tone felt dazed and a little confused, but it was real and it touched the part of Harry that had switched off when it was gone. This caused raw power and a sudden lack of clarity to converge: it was not a good combination. The magic surrounding Smith leapt back at him and whipped around him; it wanted to be used and it sang its captivating song to his every cell. He barely noticed that Zacharius slid to the floor in front of him, he was too caught up in the power flowing through and around him.

Suddenly Draco was there standing directly before him. His soul mate's grey eyes bored into his and pale, shaking fingers reached up to rest on either side of his face.

"[Harry, you need to release the magic,]" Draco's voice sounded on a mental and physical level. "[If you block it now it could hurt people. You need to disperse it. Push it into the room; let it flow back into the walls.]"

Harry found himself frowning: he could hear Draco, he could understand the words, but it was so hard to think. The power in his veins was like a whirlwind in his mind that he had to overcome before he could know anything properly. Draco's gaze held steady and Harry felt the love pouring down the link between them.

"[I'm alright,]" his soul mate assured him firmly, "[everything is how it should be. Let the power go, you don't need it anymore. Send it back from where it came.]"

The Slytherin's eyes closed and his head went back at which point Harry found the mental presence of his lover within him strengthen. With an effort of will he managed to make his body work and he pulled Draco close, wrapping his arms around the slim, muscular frame of his soul mate, needing the physical contact to distract his mind from the purely elemental. Draco's essence stood like a rock in his mind and Harry clung to it. He had never deliberately connected with the magic around him before, only accidentally, and letting go was one of the most difficult things he had ever done.

It felt like Harry was pushing out a part of himself as he tried to control the power he had dragged to his will. It did not want to leave him, it was dangerously unstable and it took every ounce of concentration he could muster as well as Draco's commanding presence to push it away, giving it back to the room from which he had taken it. Harry lost track of time and physical reality, all he knew was the power and his soul mate.

Pushing the power away was of course not enough: he needed to keep it away and slowly he rebuilt his shields. It felt as if it took him forever to put his mind back behind its barriers, but as the world slowly returned Harry had enough brainpower left to realise it could not have been long. He found himself kneeling on the floor with Draco clutched to him. Smith was still on the ground next to the wall, looking dazed and confused and the rest of the room was eerily silent. When he blinked and looked around everyone was staring at him.

"Harry," Hermione said gently as his eyes flicked across her, "are you and Draco okay?"

It took a moment for Harry to come to any conclusion about that and he found himself looking down at Draco's back before he could answer. His lover was half wrapped around him and had not moved from where he had his face buried in

Harry's shoulder. Draco's body was as still as his thoughts and only gradually did Harry become aware of a fury growing inside his soul mater. All at once Draco exploded from his arms, coming to his feet and rounding on Zacharius Smith in one, graceful, terrifying movement. The Slytherin's hands snaked out at speed and grabbed the Hufflepuff by the front of his robe, dragging Smith to his feet with rage-induced strength.

"Are you a complete moron?" Draco yelled at the top of his lungs, face no more than an inch from his captive's. "Have you any idea what you just did? Do you know how many laws you broke? Do you even understand how incredibly stupid that was? Can you even conceive of how dangerous your petty little game could have been?"

Harry just knelt there watching as his lover screamed at the helpless Zacharius. Strangely he did not feel tired, not like the previous evening: in fact he felt somehow energised, but he could not quite put his body into motion.

"He could have killed you, you imbecilic little pedant," Draco was nowhere near finished yet. "He has more power at his beck and call than you could possibly imagine and he could have snuffed you out like a candle. And do you even care what that would have done to him? He blames himself for enough death already you filthy, hypocritical worm, can you even begin to understand how he would have felt if that power had wiped your insignificant hide off the face of this planet?"

There was something almost apocalyptic about the Slytherin at that moment. His rage was so pure that it gave him an ethereal quality. Draco appeared to be holding the Hufflepuff against the wall effortlessly.

"The only reason you're still alive is Harry is the most good, noble, just and kind hearted person I have ever met," Draco threw the words like knives. "He could have blown you into little pieces: scattered your atoms to the four winds, but he didn't. Can you get that into your thick skull? You took away the one thing keeping him sane and he did! not! kill! you! Do you understand? Harry Potter is good. At a fundamental level he is better than every one of you. He has seen more pain and suffering than any of you are ever likely to know and he is still good. If any of you ever suggest that he is in league with Voldemort ever again I will take you apart with my bare hands."

Then as if he had run out of steam Draco just dropped his captive. Smith slid down the wall bonelessly, a look of complete shock on his face. As Draco took his gaze off Zacharius and glared around the room at the rest of the DA, Harry finally forced his limbs into motion. He pushed himself into a standing position and reached for his soul mate, pulling Draco into his arms, not quite sure who needed the touch more, him or his lover.

"We're going to bed," he said quietly, only knowing that he did not wish to be here anymore. "You decide what you like; I'll abide by whatever you choose."

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out the galleon he used to call meetings and then he flipped it onto the floor. With a last look at Hermione and Ron he walked towards the door with Draco close by his side and they left the room together.

Chapter 14 The Aftermath

The fury left him feeling empty and Draco barely registered the trip back to Gryffindor tower. He didn't even pay much attention to the members of the house in the common room; he just followed Harry across it and up the stairs. It was only when they reached their room and the door closed on the outside world that Draco realised his soul mate was far more agitated than he was. As he focused on Harry, he could only describe his lover as wired.

"I nearly killed him," Harry said and turned to him. "I had no control. I'm lethal."

Draco put aside any residue feelings of his own about the meeting with the DA and stepped up towards his soul mate resolutely. He took Harry's chin in one hand and made Harry look him directly in the eye.

"You showed more control than they will ever understand," he said firmly. "I can see into your soul, Harry, I know you and you are not a killer. You held raw magic in your will, you could have destroyed the whole room and everyone in it, but you didn't. You threw a stupid boy against a stupid wall and that was all you did. Every word I said to them was true, e-ver-y word."

He showed Harry what he had seen when Hermione woke him from the stupefy hex: the raw energy Draco had sensed when his soul mate stalked Smith.

"You were magnificent," he said forcefully and pushed himself against Harry's taut frame.

There was passion in his lover, Draco could feel it and at the moment Harry was using it to deride himself; Draco knew it needed to be turned to something else.

"He tried to hurt me, Harry," he said steadily, never letting his lover look away, "and you protected me. I'm yours, Harry, and he didn't understand that. Show me what it means to be yours."

The emotions coming from his soul mate told Draco that Harry knew he was being manipulated, but that he could not fight it. The anger at himself was already changing inside Harry and the fire was turning to desire and it washed over Draco as their minds mingled.

"Draco," Harry tried to say something but by placing a hand over his lover's mouth Draco stopped him.

"It doesn't matter," he told Harry with complete certainty, "nothing matters. I love you."

[I want you,] he switched to his inner voice and Harry swayed towards him. [Love me, Harry.]

As Draco removed his hand his lover leant forward, his mouth covering Draco's and his arms entwining the Slytherin hungrily. The sheer sexuality of what Harry was ran through every pore of the Hecatemus' body, and Draco could feel it all. As Harry's tongue slipped into Draco's mouth the Slytherin bared the need he felt in his body to his lover. Draco found the place within him that was raw sexual want and he flooded Harry with it knowing that it would drive his soul mate to delirium.

Draco knew Harry was strong. He had felt the power of Quidditch trained muscle, but even he was surprised when Harry bodily lifted him off the ground. His lover threw the Slytherin on the four-poster bed and climbed on after him, pushing Draco's knees apart and settling between his legs. Harry's hands were suddenly everywhere: running up and down Draco's body over his clothes. He touched and he stroked and he teased until Draco forgot who was supposed to be egging whom on.

Nimble fingers worked at the fastenings on Draco's clothes and he shifted his hips without thinking when Harry pulled at the top of his uniform trousers. They came off in one swift movement as the Hecatemus moved off the bed for a moment and relieved his lover of any vestige of modesty. Draco's already healthy erection twitched as Harry looked down at him from where he was standing. It would have taken no time for Draco to wriggle out of the rest of his clothes as well but his lover did not appear interested in that. Instead Harry climbed back on the bed between Draco's knees and lent over him, pushing his shirt up his torso so the Gryffindor could kiss the flat muscled stomach.

A moan of pure ecstasy escaped Draco's mouth as Harry stroked his fingers over the sensitive skin between his legs and down between his buttocks. It was just a playful stroke, but it promised so much more and he moved into the touch.

[Soon,] Harry whispered in his mind.

Harry's hands were moving again, this time over bare skin and up under Draco's remaining clothes. Each movement caused pleasure and each touch drew a small sound of want. He knew he was helpless under Harry's attentions and he loved it.

Harry's clothes were pleasantly rough against Draco's smooth skin and there was a hardness under the material as Harry pushed himself against his lover. Draco lifted himself off the bed as his soul mate's arms ran under him and he shivered as Harry's hands ran down over his back and behind. His lover's desire burned along side his own passion and Draco knew what he wanted: he wanted Harry. Tonight neither of them required any elaborate games; this was about raw need.

Draco could sense that Harry knew exactly what he was feeling and Harry moved to accommodate him. Harry lowered Draco back to the bed and he moved to undo his lover's belt and fly Harry did not resist. As he watched Harry pushed the material aside and freed himself from his underwear. To Draco's growing interest his lover made no further move to take off his clothes and he held out his hand towards the beside cabinet.

"Accio salve," Draco heard and the pot of lubricant from the draw moved to Harry's hand.

As he watched, Harry languidly opened the container and calmly dipped his fingers into it. Under his gaze Harry pulled them out again and Draco could see the slick lubricant covering the raised digits. He felt the heat in his body increase and his groin throbbed as he watched Harry coat his own erection in the substance. Draco wanted his lover and he wanted him now and he couldn't help the moan of lust that passed his lips. With a smile Harry discarded the pot of lubricant and ran his still slick fingers over Draco's stomach.

[Harry,] the arroused wizard all but pleaded.

Harry leant over Draco, pushing his knees up and apart, green eyes running over Dracor's spread body hungrily. Draco could feel the arousal in Harry almost as

much as in himself and he felt the shot of excitement that ran through his lover as he positioned himself above Draco and touched him lightly. The hardness of the Harry's slick shaft pushed gently against Draco's entrance and he tried to relax, knowing what was coming. When Harry pushed in Draco gasped and tried not to follow the instinctive want to tense up at the intrusion. His lover did not wait for him to relax again, he continued his movement forward causing the most delicious burning sensation, somewhere between pain and pleasure. His soul mate was not rough, Harry was never rough, but Draco knew he had goaded his lover into a very direct mood and Harry did not stop until he was buried in him to the hilt.

It never ceased to amaze Draco how their minds connected during sex: it was like at no other time. He could feel Harry deep inside him and he could feel Harry surrounded by him almost as if they were some strange creature making love to itself. They were separate in that Draco sensed someone else was touching him and Harry's body knew he was thrusting into another human being, but the sensations were intensified and doubled as they shared them. When Harry pulled Draco's ankles up on to his shoulders and ran his hands down the inside of his legs they both moaned at the pulse it sent through Draco's body.

Harry remained still, his head bent forward and his eyes closed and Draco watched his lover through lowered eyelids. They were joined, physically and mentally, and he revelled in the sensation. Very slowly Harry began to move, pulling out no more than a few millimetres before pushing himself back towards Draco. The Slytherin gasped as his muscles tightened and released again in a stab of sensation and Harry did not stop. Each pull back and subsequent thrust became more pronounced and every stroke inside him caused waves of pleasure to run through Draco's whole body.

He wrapped his fingers in his spread robe and arched off the bed to meet every move Harry made. The sensations running through him were so completely encompassing that he could barely think: all that existed was the two-bodied being that was each of them and both of them at the same time. There was no end of Draco and beginning of Harry and the passion he had so masterfully marshalled in his soul mate consumed them both.

Time had little meaning and was measured in sensations rather than seconds as both wizards surrendered to their desire. They reached for climax together and Draco felt like they would explode from the pressure before he lost his grip on reality totally and came, long and hard screaming Harry's name. This was how things were meant to be; this was the only reality that mattered: One body, one mind, one being.

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Surprisingly, even after the stressful events at the DA meeting, Harry had slept incredibly well, as had Draco. For a first night out of their warded room and after all the excitement of the previous day, Harry was quite amazed when he woke up feeling refreshed and ready to face the new day. The room in the house tower had some basic wards to keep out any particularly strong magic, but as Harry lay there letting the sleep drift from his mind, he could feel the power humming through the building.

When he slept he did not have his barriers at full strength, but they were still there. It was not something he had consciously practiced, it seemed to come naturally once his shielding skill had reached a certain level, and Harry lowered them a little more to explore his new environment. In a strange abstract way he

could feel the people below the room as magical pools and vague emotional centres. It was not something he had experienced before and he found he liked it: it made him feel connected.

For a while he turned his mind onto his other senses rather than the normal five and let his abilities guide him. It was as if he was relearning about the place where he had spent half his life and he catalogued every detail. Harry felt around the protection spells that were as old as the building on which they lay and he let his mind explore the woven magic that allowed parts of the tower to function correctly. His thoughts connected with a bright spark of magic which felt suddenly startled and then acknowledged him in a bizarre, other worldly way: he had come across one of the house elves going about her business.

It was wonderful and strange and exhilarating all at the same time. Harry did not go so far as to identify all his fellow Gryffindors by their magical forms, nor did he pry into what any were feeling, he just allowed himself to acknowledge they were there. Only as Harry let his mind return to himself did he realise Draco was awake. He turned his head to look at his lover and Draco smiled from where he was lying on his side watching Harry.

[You felt so at peace,] Draco said silently as their eyes met, [as if you were doing what you were made for.]

Harry smiled at that, it had felt somehow correct.

[I never realised how much the wards shut out,] he admitted, [the world knits together in a far more complicated way than I thought, I was exploring.]

He shared some of the thoughts and feeling he had experienced during his mental travels and Draco assimilated them thoughtfully. His soul mate's face was contemplative for a while and then he smiled again.

[I don't think your mind works in a way even close to how it used to,] Draco replied lightly, his grey eyes sparkling.

[And what does that say about yours?] Harry asked with a mental laugh. [You understand me, after all.]

[No comment,] Draco replied and sat up lazily.

With a very catlike stretch, Draco ran his fingers through his hair and yawned. The usually pristine Slytherin was very particular about his appearance, but Harry was rather fond of him tousled and he sat up, leant over and kissed his lover before Draco could climb out of bed.

[You're adorable first thing in the morning,] he said lightly.

Draco gave him an appraising look as if he was losing it.

"I have bed hair and my teeth need a clean," was the sceptical response, "you have a funny definition of adorable."

"I'm a half-blood," Harry replied with a mischievous grin, "you have to forgive our eccentricities."

Draco laughed and Harry thought it was a delightful sound.

"Potter, you're insane," his lover said and, as he watched, climbed out of bed. "Now do not go back to sleep, we have lessons this morning."

For a while Harry lay back down and just observed as Draco moved around the room, but eventually he dragged himself back into a sitting position. It took him a minute or so to reinforce his mental barriers to their everyday level and then he crawled out of bed reluctantly. What Harry really would have liked to do was climb back in dragging Draco with him and spend all morning acquainting himself with his lover's body -- again. He must have been broadcasting his thoughts because Draco gave him a rolled eye look and shook his head ruefully.

[Get your eyes off my behind,] his soul mate said firmly with a laugh, [we don't have time this morning.]

[Spoilsport,] Harry replied, but did manage to drag his mind onto what he was supposed to be doing.

It was still early and they went about their morning routine before most of the house roused itself.

They both knew the news would be the only thing the whole school would be talking about and when they had discussed it as they made preparations for the day, Harry had suggested they miss breakfast and go straight to their first lesson. Draco had not liked the idea at all, but had grudgingly agreed to it when Harry added in taking a quick trip to see the house elves and at least picking up some food. When it came to Harry's health, Draco had turned into a drill sergeant and passing out in class was not something he was going to allow. However, when the pair ventured out of their room to sneak down to the kitchens they found the whole of the Gryffindor seventh year waiting for them in the common room.

"We thought we'd all go to breakfast together," Hermione said brightly from where she was hanging off Ron's arm.

Stunned was the word that came to Harry's mind for the effect the united front had on Draco, and he wasn't doing much better himself. That the house had welcomed them in was one thing, but that they were willing to show complete solidarity outside the safety of the tower blew Harry's mind.

Draco shielded him carefully from the others as they formed up around the couple, almost like a protective barrier, but the alert Slytherin did not stop Hermione reaching over to Harry. The young man felt his friend press something into his hand and she smiled at him. She then did the same with Draco who looked at her a little startled. When Harry looked down there was his galleon in his fingers and he looked over to see that his soul mate was holding one of the clones.

After that Harry walked to breakfast in a kind of pleasant haze. It didn't lift until the morning owls arrived and his subscription to the Daily Prophet landed next to his plate. Reluctantly he picked up the newspaper and pulled it out of its binding. He looked at the publication in his hand, but Harry knew what he was going to see before he read it. The front page of the Prophet was emblazoned in large black letters with "The Boy Who Is Hecatemus". He didn't even bother to read any further he just passed it to Draco who actually seemed interested in what it said.

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By the hour lunchtime arrived Harry was ravenous and he didn't need to be in contact with his lover to know that the same was true of Draco. The last few weeks had been a matter of eat on demand and moving back into a schedule was more difficult than it might have appeared. Both young men swooped on the Gryffindor table as if their lived depended on it.

"Are you two hungry?" Ron asked as he looked at the plates the pair had in front of them.

Harry glanced up from where he had just stuck his fork in the large pile of mashed potato on his plate. Sausage, mash and gravy was not the most sophisticated of meals, but it looked like heaven as far as his stomach was concerned. Draco had chosen steak and kidney pudding for a similar reason.

"Starving," Harry admitted, and, for his part, Draco grinned at Ron.

Without further ado, Harry set about demolishing his lunch and it wasn't for a good five minutes that he noticed some of his friends were not doing the same. He looked up to find that Dean and Neville were looking at him and Draco.

"You weren't kidding, were you," the Muggle-born Gryffindor said a little incredulously.

"Their metabolisms are running at two or three times normal," Hermione said helpfully as she sat down beside the group.

"Really, that much?" Harry hadn't picked up that piece of information yet and he was quite interested.

He knew his appetite had increased considerably and he was still under strict instruction to eat heartily and well, but he had had no idea by how much.

"Could be more at the moment," Hermione provided as she poured herself a goblet of water.

"I still don't see how one person can eat that much food in one sitting," Ginny said conversationally, "except Ron of course, but everyone knows there's nothing inside him but space for what he consumes."

Harry grinned as Ron glared at his little sister, but no one in on the conversation failed to notice that Ron did not argue the point. However, even the legendary eating ability of the Weasley males could not match Harry and Draco any more.

The morning had been tiring for Harry, but, as he ate, the food seemed to be helping. If he had been back in their room in the hospital wing the Gryffindor would have taken a nap, but as it was he tried to banish the lethargy he was feeling to the back of his mind.

People had been staring at them all day and Harry was pretty sure all the Slytherins now viewed him as the spawn of the nastiest thing to ever crawl the earth. Draco had out glared several of his Slytherin housemates over the morning and so far there had been no more serious incidents. The Gryffindors seemed to be protecting them from all the other houses and there had been little interaction, which was very good as far as Harry was concerned, because he did not have the energy to deal with anything like that today.

[Maybe you should take the afternoon off,] Draco suggested silently as Harry paused eating, [now that there's no need to hide you don't have to push so hard.]

Harry rewarded his soul mate's concern with a warm smile, but shook his head slightly.

[I'll be fine,] he replied cheerfully, [it's bound to be tiring the first day, and I want to get back to normal as fast as possible.]

Draco snorted a laugh at that which earned him several looks since nothing anyone had been saying out loud was particularly worthy of the reaction. Harry had to hide his own smile as the Slytherin smirked mysteriously at the Gryffindors.

[The day you and I are normal is the day Snape awards you house points and Dumbledore actually appears sane,] Draco said silently. [I have never been normal and I don't intend to start now.]

Harry almost choked on his sausage.

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Draco had his hand firmly clamped in Harry's as they made their way back to the Gryffindor common room after their first day and he couldn't help glancing at his lover every now and then. The description of zombie came to mind when he looked at Harry's face: his soul mate barely appeared to be awake. There was no distress coming from Harry, but Draco knew that his lover was, putting it bluntly, completely knackered. He was glad the end of their last lesson hadn't been too strenuous, or he wasn't sure Harry would have made it back to the tower.

"Harry, you in there?" Ron asked from where he was walking just behind with Hermione.

"Hmm," Harry replied and woke up a little from his daze, "yeah, just tired."

"You could have gone back to our room and taken a nap when I had Arithmancy after lunch," Draco chided gently.

"Unless you have a spell for waking the dead I am not sleeping during the day," Harry replied with a smile as they walked up to the Fat Lady. "Brandy wine," he said absently. "Anyway Arithmancy was interesting: I have no idea what you were going on about most of the time, but it was interesting."

The portrait opened and the four stepped through. Draco was quite surprised that Harry had found anything to interest him in what many people in school considered the most boring subject next to The History of Magic.

"Upstairs," Draco said evenly as Harry paused in the common room and glanced at the comfortable looking sofa near the fire.

"Ooh, I love it when you're forceful," his lover said with a grin.

Draco gave him an unimpressed look: he did not want Harry keeling over in the common room and he definitely didn't want to have to help put any broken shields back if someone overpowered his soul mate's defences; the after effects were not always fun and he'd had enough of that over the past couple of days.

“Just move, Wonder Boy,” Draco said with a half smile, “before you fall down.”

It occurred to him that the whole conversation had to be a very bizarre spectacle for the Gryffindor common room, but Draco was not about to compromise.

“I can manage one day without collapsing,” Harry said pointedly, but the confused state his thoughts were in gave everything away to Draco.

He put both hands on his hips and glared at his soul mate.

“Okay, I’m going,” Harry capitulated easily which gave a good indication that he was fully aware Draco was right.

As Harry walked towards the tower steps Hermione caught Draco’s arm just before he went to follow.

“Will you two be down for dinner?” she asked with a slightly worried look in Harry’s direction.

Draco shook his head following her gaze.

“No,” he replied evenly, “I can guarantee that when we get upstairs Harry will just pass out. He’s going to need to eat tonight though, but I don’t want him going anywhere near the main hall.”

Hermione smiled at that.

“I’ll ask the house elves to bring you both something,” she said supportively.

Draco found himself smiling: he was beginning to realise that friends like the Muggle-born witch were worth their weight in gold. It was a concept that he was only slowly coming to accept.

“Thank you,” he said genuinely and then went to follow Harry. “I wonder if he’ll be more interested in sex or food when he wakes up,” he mused absently, his lover’s dazed state rubbing off on him.

“Malfoy,” it was Ron’s voice and Draco turned before he went up the steps. “For the record, don’t think out loud, it’s disturbing.”

He gave the Gryffindor an unrepentant smile and then climbed after Harry. When he walked into their room and closed the door his lover was kicking off his shoes and only had eyes for the bed.

“Wake me for dinner,” Harry said having totally missed the conversation Draco had just had with Hermione.

Draco did not bother to try and dissuade his soul mate of the idea, however, and he watched his lover climb onto the bed. Harry lay down on his front without shedding anything but his footwear and promptly went to sleep almost before his head hit the pillow. Harry had been in the dopey, half dreamlike state between waking and sleeping for the last few minutes so there was barely any transition that Draco could discern.

For a few moments he considered joining Harry on the bed: it was a very inviting idea, but he decided it would just be an indulgence. Draco had homework that

needed doing and he was behind everyone else even though the work had been passed to them in the hospital wing, so he turned to the large desk in the corner. With a final fond glance as his sleeping lover Draco set about finding his way back to the head of the class.

Chapter 15 Coaching and Other Pastimes

Harry stood in front of the Quidditch team without his uniform and looked the vice-captain straight in the eye as she glared at him. Jessica Toxton was a sixth year and a good tactician and Harry knew she could lead the team. Having all but passed out the previous day Harry had not been sure he could make the practice, but the second day did not seem to be so bad, and after a little persuading from Draco he had taken a nap in a free double lesson in the afternoon. Harry felt quite refreshed even though he had been dreading the team meeting all day.

"But it's not as if Malfoy is going to be on the other team," she said pointedly, "why can't you play?"

"Because I'm not allowed to," Harry really didn't want to have to explain in detail and he had hoped that he would just be able to tell them. "You have no idea how much I want to play, but I can't."

"Spari is no where near the Seeker you are," the girl complained, "no offense Spari."

"None taken," the team's reserve Seeker said honestly: the girl had talent, but she was only a fourth year and she had had nowhere near the practice Harry had.

Harry sent a pleading look at Ron and Ginny to help him out, but neither seemed to have much idea what to do. This was getting them nowhere and, in a desperate attempt to finish one of the most painful conversations in his life, Harry kicked open the Quidditch box. He then pulled out the snitch and set it free.

"See that," he said as the enchanted object flitted around the team, and he lowered his barriers carefully.

Jessica looked at a loss to know what he was doing but nodded anyway. Harry held out his hand and connected with the magic in the snitch and it flew straight into his fingers.

"That's why I can't play," he pointed out firmly. "It's what's known in the business as an unfair advantage and put that together with the fact that, if I let it, the snitch glows like a neon sign it's not exactly difficult for me to spot it."

The members of the team who were not privy to inside information just stared at him for a while.

"How the hell did you do that?" Jessica finally asked, her expression a little awed.

Harry realised unhappily that he was not going to get away without giving an explanation so he went for the shortest one he could think of.

"Magic's attracted to me," he said plainly, "all I had to do was connect to the right bit and the snitch came straight to my hand."

"Wow," was Jessica's concise opinion.

There was an awed silence for a moment and then reality made it back into the room.

"Oh hell, we'll never be ready in time, our first match is in less than a week and it's Slytherin," the girl bemoaned the team's fate.

"Well they'll have a new Seeker as well," Harry pointed out, not willing to be the cause of so much despondency. "Draco's not allowed to play either, even if they hadn't thrown him off the team and I'd be happy to help Spari with some intensive training sessions if you like. Oh, and she's welcome to borrow the Firebolt."

The vice-captain appeared slightly confused.

"But you're not allowed to play," she said slowly and Harry realised his housemates were being a little too literal.

"Not allowed to play in competitive matches," he clarified quickly, "I can fly a broom like anyone else, although it might be a good idea to make sure I don't land on my head, Draco might get upset."

"Then why aren't you in your uniform?" Jessica asked pointedly. "You are still our Captain aren't you?"

"Well I didn't know if," he saw his vice-captain's face take on a look of disbelief and then harden, "what with everything, that you'd..." he trailed off. "I'll be right back," he decided quickly and, handing the snitch to Jessica, ran in the direction of Gryffindor tower.

Draco had been standing outside the Gryffindor team meeting and as Harry ran he heard his soul mate's laughter in his head.

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One thing Harry was not expecting as he sat in the common room reading "Hecatemae: The Greatest Loves In History" (a dull text book that had a few useful pieces of information in it) was for a copy of Witch Weekly to be dumped in his lap. There on the front cover was a picture of himself and Draco glaring and gesturing at each other in the middle of the Quidditch pitch after the previous year's house final. Harry had caught the snitch, but he and Draco had collided and crashed into the ground together, at which point they had started yelling at each other. Someone had obviously captured the moment on film and they were arguing for the whole world to see.

"You thought you were a pin up before," Ron said, flopping down onto the sofa beside his friend, "you and Draco are now the hottest thing to hit the news stands since Cecily Boden married Kirk Strange."

Harry did not get the reference, but he did understand the meaning. Ever since Harry had hit sixteen, a growth spurt and been made Captain of the house Quidditch team he had had trouble with the teen magazines. The Boy Who Lived had become The Boy Who Every Teen Witch Wanted On Their Wall and there didn't seem to be a month that went by when someone didn't publish a picture of him. Harry had just started to ignore it and continued to refuse the offers of exclusive interviews. He had known that his relationship with Draco would spark media interest, but he had assumed that the teen magazines would shy away from the subject.

"I'm firmly attached to another male," Harry bemoaned looking at Witch Weekly exasperatedly, "why would a girls' magazine want anything to do with me now?"

"Because, Harry," Hermione said coming up behind Ron, "there's nothing more romantic than true love. The first person to get a shot of you and Draco kissing will earn a fortune."

"My camera's upstairs," Colin Creevey offered as he walked past.

Harry glared at the sixth year, but the boy looked unrepentant and continued on his way. The fact that half the wizarding world was speculating on his love life was highly embarrassing as far as Harry was concerned; of course Draco was enjoying every second. As if on cue his lover came bounding down the tower steps from where he had been in their room. Draco had made himself surprisingly at home among the Gryffindors already and, although the first years were terrified of him, the rest of the house had settled into the routine of having their own Slytherin in residence. Harry thought most of them viewed the rather unconventional young man like an eccentric lost relation who had shown up on the doorstep.

"Ooh, more fame," Draco said cheerfully as he placed himself on the arm of the sofa next to Harry. "We really should take charge of this and do an interview or something."

For a moment Harry just looked at his lover open mouthed: from trying to hide, Draco appeared to have gone to the other extreme. An unrepentant grin was all that greeted the incredulous look Harry knew was on his face as Draco picked up the magazine.

"We can't stop it, Harry," Draco said as he leafed through Witch Weekly to find the article, "we may as well control it."

Harry opened his mouth to voice his opposition to the whole idea and then just closed it again: it made an odd sort of sense.

"I know I will hate myself for saying this," Ron commented as his friend tried to sort out what he was actually considering, "but Malfoy might be right."

"Of course I'm right, Weasley," Draco said with his usual impeccable timing, but his voice held no venom, "I am always right."

"And modest too," Harry commented with a laugh.

Draco pouted at him sexily with mock hurt in his face and Harry had to squelch the desire to drag his lover into his arms. From virtually nothing, Harry's sex drive had grown exponentially and was off the scale these days.

[Don't do that,] he warned silently, [or I'll end up ravishing you on the common room floor.]

[Although that would make great news, I find that I am not that much of an exhibitionist,] Draco returned with a smirk. [Seriously though, we really do need to take charge of this.]

[I know,] Harry replied mournfully, [but I wish we didn't have to. There's been something on us in the Prophet every day and the whole school is speculating on where we first had sex!]

[The most popular bet is the Potions classroom,] Draco provided helpfully and Harry was not surprised his lover knew all the details. [Of course when they find

out the truth those toilets are going to be the hottest make out spot in the school.]

[And that will please Moaning Myrtle no end,] Harry commented.

[At least she'll have something to look at,] Draco replied and was interrupted by a cough.

Harry looked round at Ron and Hermione and realised what he and his soul mate had been doing. Speaking with their minds came so naturally to him and Draco that sometimes they forgot that they were doing it.

"Sorry," he apologised quickly, "um, ah."

"You forgot you weren't alone?" Hermione offered with a smile.

Harry gave in graciously and just nodded.

"So if we're going to do this," he said reluctantly, "do we go through channels to arrange it or do we go straight to Hermione's contacts?"

"McGonagall," Hermione said firmly before anyone else could reply, "you need her on side for it to work out okay and it's not exactly nice to be bypassed all the time. A press conference might be better than an exclusive to begin with so that no one feels left out. Then you could go for a more in-depth expose later to allay the feeding frenzy."

Draco and Hermione began to talk quite excitedly and Harry definitely heard them mention Creevey's name at one point. He went back to "Hecatemae: The Greatest Loves In History" wondering what he had let himself in for.

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Draco did not know why he had been summoned to the Headmaster's office; the note had been short and polite, but had not given any details as to why he was wanted. He had left Harry trying to teach Spari what came naturally to the Gryffindor Seeker and Draco was not particularly happy about answering the summons. He was well aware that his presence made the Quidditch team edgy, but he wasn't yet willing to leave Harry by himself if he could help it. Stepping on to the stairs outside Dumbledore's office he was not in the best of moods.

"Liquorice wand," he said shortly and then attempted to school his features into something other than the scowl he was currently sporting.

By the time the door opened in front of him, Draco had the perfect Malfoy expression of superior indifference well in place. He stepped into the room to see the headmaster and an unknown woman by the desk. Draco catalogued the woman in a heartbeat: she was short, brunette, slim, mid thirties or so and appeared completely calm.

"Ah, Draco," Dumbledore greeted with a smile, "thank you very much for coming. I'd like you to meet Professor Praeceptrix from the Ministry. She is an expert in Hecatemae."

Draco was not sure whether to be pleased or hostile that the Ministry had sent one of their people to Hogwarts. He did not like the bureaucrats who maintained

they ran the wizarding world, but he was well aware that information was useful no matter from whence it came. He walked over and offered his hand politely.

"Pleased to meet you, Professor," he said in a neutral tone.

"Call, me Hilde," the woman said with a smile, shaking Draco's offered limb. "I'm so sorry to drag you away from your bond mate, I had no idea Professor Dumbledore had asked you to come. It must be a great strain."

The genuine concern Hilde showed surprised Draco somewhat: his experience of ministry employees was petty little people sticking their noses in where they didn't belong and she did not fit the mould.

"Draco," he replied, not sure how to take the woman. "As long as he doesn't fall off his broom I think I can cope."

She looked at him strangely then and opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, but turned back to Dumbledore before she did. Draco was sure he had seen her dismiss an idea that had entered her head and it intrigued him.

"Hilde is here to offer her assistance," Dumbledore explained calmly. "As you know, Draco, Hecatemae are usually trained from birth. Hilde is one of the team who would be sent out if a Hecatemae child were discovered. She is here to see if she might be of assistance to you and Harry."

Draco bristled as the insinuation that he couldn't cope.

"I'm not here to intrude on your bond," the Professor said as if sensing what he was thinking. "I am quite aware that you are the only expert on how to help your soul mate, but I felt I should offer any assistance I could in case you would like it. I am trained in many meditative forms and would be most willing to assist you with the transition into your new life in any way I can."

Her words quite nicely put out the fire that was starting in Draco and he realised that he was being defensive. Over protective was not a phrase that had ever been associated with Draco before Harry, but it was a fact of life these days.

"Thank you," he said evenly, "that might be useful. Harry's still having trouble in crowds and anything you could show us to help would be much appreciated."

Hilde had that strange look in her eyes again as if she was considering something that she couldn't believe she was considering.

"If you don't mind me asking," she said slowly and Draco was pretty sure the woman was feeling like an idiot for saying anything, "but how do you know?"

"Know what?" he asked, not quite following her line of reasoning.

"Know that your bond mate has trouble in crowds?" Hilde said as if she really didn't want to ask.

The question seemed a little strange, but Draco didn't see the harm in answering.

"Well Harry had a breakdown at the Halloween feast, but that wasn't really his fault because we were stupid enough to try and pretend that nothing was going on, and he had another one in a crowded corridor on the way to a lesson yesterday so we take the back routes now," he provided helpfully.

For a moment Draco thought Hilde's eyes were going to pop out, or that she was choking on one of Dumbledore's sherbet lemons. The woman had paled and she was looking stunned.

"I was given to understand you've been bonded nearly three weeks," Hilde said slowly, pulling herself together. "Is that in error."

"No," Draco replied calmly, "three weeks tomorrow if you go from when we woke up. Three weeks the day before yesterday if you go from, um, the initial encounter."

"And both of you are already back in the general school population?" the question was somewhat incredulous.

Draco nodded; he was beginning to think that Hilde was having trouble processing this information.

"And you didn't think it might be advisable to wait a little longer?" she asked bringing herself more under control.

"Well the cover story was wearing a little thin," he explained, wondering what reaction Hilde would have next. "It was come out or have to tell the truth and at that point we were under the illusion that we could fool everyone else. We managed it for nearly a day before Harry's shields cracked at the feast. But didn't you read all this in the papers: someone sold them the whole story?"

"I don't read the papers," the woman said as if still trying to process what Draco was telling her. "You really tried to pretend that you weren't bonded?"

"It was a valiant effort," Dumbledore put in cheerfully, "if it hadn't been for Neville Longbottom they might even have made it a whole day."

For a Ministry expert Hilde seemed to be a somewhat of a loss: Draco found her expression quite amusing.

"Before," she said quietly, "when you mentioned falling off a broom; you weren't speaking figuratively were you."

That caused a smile to play at Draco's mouth before he could stop it.

"No," he replied honestly, "Harry's taking Quidditch practice for the Gryffindors. He can't play in the games, but they wanted to keep him as team captain and he's under the illusion that they have a chance of beating Slytherin tomorrow."

"And you're here and he's there and..." Hilde seemed to be having a problem with the truth.

Dumbledore came to her rescue.

"Are you feeling alright, Hilde?" the headmaster asked supportively. "You seem to have gone a little pale."

Draco watched in fascination as shock and disbelief warred on the woman's features. He was quite surprised at just how flabbergasted Hilde appeared to be.

"I'm so sorry," the woman apologised quickly, turning back to the two wizards from where she had taken to staring at the table, "this is my life's work you see and well I just find it all quite amazing. Draco, I have to tell you that you have astounded me. From my research my best estimate on reintroducing you and Harry to normal life was three months and then I thought I was being optimistic. Whatever you are doing you are doing it spectacularly well and I offer you my complete support. Anything I can do to help, just name it."

For a moment Draco looked at her evenly: Hilde appeared to be gushing at him and he was not used to people gushing at him, well except his mother.

"Thank you," he said eventually.

He was not sure what else to say, his natural caution unwilling to go into details at that moment.

"I'm sorry, Hilde, Headmaster, but I really must get back to Harry," Draco said suddenly. "I'd rather talk about this when Harry's free anyway."

"Of course, My Boy," Dumbledore said brightly and rose to his feet, "we wouldn't dream of keeping you any longer. I'll have Hilde put up in the guest quarters and we can all meet again at a later time."

Draco stood up himself and smiled at Hilde politely, nodding at the headmaster as he turned to leave. He was just heading through the door when they started talking again.

"I am truly amazed," Hilde said and the surprise was still in her voice.

"As you will find out, My Dear," Dumbledore's warm tones replied, "Harry and Draco are two of the most remarkable young men you are ever likely to meet, and I am not just referring to their unique position."

The words caused Draco's step to falter slightly: he had always known Dumbledore thought Harry was exceptional, but he had never considered that his position in the old wizard's affections was anything but his association to Harry. He continued on his way trying to decide how exactly this made him feel.

Chapter 16 Nerves

Harry knew he was being ridiculous, but when Draco had told him about Hilde he'd been incredibly nervous. Then Dumbledore's note had arrived asking if they were both available for a joint meeting in the evening and he'd become even more anxious. Somehow facing an expert on his condition was worse than anything that had gone before. Harry found himself asking stupid questions such as: Was he what he was supposed to be like? Was he doing anything wrong? And just about every other doubt about his predicament that he could imagine.

Draco had rolled his eyes and asked Harry not to think so loud in the normal sarcastic manner he used when Harry was being an idiot. This didn't help Harry stop being a twit, but it made him feel a little better since someone had confirmed that that is exactly what he was doing. By the time the hour of the meeting arrived Harry wanted to run and hide.

[Harry,] Draco said very firmly as they made their way to the guest tower where Hilde was staying, [you're unique. Even if the Ministry did have some fantastical set of measurements Hecatemae were supposed to live up to, they'd have to throw them away when it came to you. Besides, I told you what Hilde said, she was amazed we're out of a warded room.]

[I can't help it,] Harry replied fretfully, [she knows more about what I'm supposed to be than I do. I feel like she's going to dissect me.]

They were walking down a mostly empty corridor and Draco stopped, turned him and gave Harry an appraising look. Then, much to the growing embarrassment of a third year Ravenclaw who Harry could see coming from ahead of them, Draco kissed his soul mate on the nose.

[She's nice,] Draco said firmly, [and I won't let her dissect you.]

That rather shocked Harry out of his anxiety for a moment as his lover turned back in the correct direction and began walking again, pulling him along by the hand.

[Draco,] Harry said as they started moving, [did you just call someone nice? Have you traced her family history back four generations or something?]

The Slytherin glanced at him with a raised eyebrow at the touch of sarcasm in Harry's inner voice.

[I have on occasion actually liked people,] Draco replied coolly, [and I said she was nice, I didn't say I trusted her.]

[I don't think we have the same definition of nice,] Harry decided before going back to worrying.

Draco did not have to drag him up the stairs in the guest tower, but Harry did hang back as his soul mate knocked on the door of the room to which they had been asked come. It wasn't even as if he didn't know what to expect: Draco had freely shared his memories with him and he was fully aware of what he would see when the entrance opened for them.

"Ah, there you are, Gentlemen," Dumbledore's cheerful tones greeted as he pulled back the oak door. "Do come in."

Harry entered tentatively, holding tightly to Draco's hand and trying not to let his complete panic show on his face. Hilde was sitting on a chair on the other side of the room, but the moment she laid eyes on him she rose to her feet, a most excited look on her face.

"Harry, this is Hilde," the headmaster introduced.

For a moment Harry thought the woman was going to bound forward, but she bounced on the soles of her feet and beamed at him instead.

"I'm so pleased to meet you, Mr Potter," Hilde said and her enthusiasm reminded Harry of some of the Hufflepuffs he knew.

"Harry," he said automatically.

It did not escape him that even though the woman appeared terribly excited she did not make a move towards him: she even kept her hands clasped in front of her. It was a relief that she appeared to know that he would find anything else a little uncomfortable.

"I'm so sorry if I appear a little over exuberant," Hilde told him with a sheepish grin, "but I never really believed I would have a chance to meet someone of Hecatemae origin, and one so unique as yourself at that."

Harry's mind decided that yes she definitely made him think of a Hufflepuff.

"Umm, ah, don't worry about it," he said, a little awkwardly.

It wasn't that Hilde didn't seem pleasant; it was just Harry found her enthusiasm embarrassing.

"Why don't we all sit down," Dumbledore decided with a smile. "I rescued some very fine macaroons from the staff room and it would be a shame to waste them."

[She's not what I expected,] Harry admitted to his soul mate silently. [What you showed me wasn't like this.]

[Hilde does rather seem to be wetting her knickers over you,] Draco returned in an amused tone. [I wonder if she wants to have your children, Potter.]

[Shut up, Malfoy,] he replied lightly.

"Tea all round?" the headmaster asked in his normal manner.

It took a few minutes to arrange, but quite quickly they were all holding teacups and macaroons. Harry was not sure if he could swallow anything, let alone a coconut cake, but he left it sitting on his saucer anyway.

"How was Quidditch practice, Harry?" Dumbledore asked conversationally.

"What?" he asked at the unexpected question. "Oh, fine thank you. Spari will give the Slytherin Seeker a good run for his money tomorrow. She's nervous, but I think she'll cope. Shame we didn't have longer to train together, given a chance she could be stunning in the air."

"I have heard you're a very good flyer yourself, Harry," Hilde joined the conversation with less excess energy than she had shown before. "Professor Dumbledore tells me you've been playing for your house since your first year. When I was at Hogwarts a first year in the team was unheard of."

"I know my way around a broom," Harry replied modestly, "I like to fly. Um, so you went to Hogwarts too?"

Hilde nodded sagely.

"Best school in the world," she said resolutely. "I never made the Quidditch team though, sport is not my area."

The curiosity tickled at the back of his brain, but Harry didn't know if he should ask the question that leapt into his head. In the end he just plunged ahead.

"If you don't mind me asking," he said with a quizzical frown, "were you a Hufflepuff?"

Hilde beamed at him at cheerfully.

"Why, yes I was," she said brightly, "let me guess, my staid and sedate manner gave me away."

Harry couldn't help smiling at that: Hilde was very likable.

"My associates are all ex-Ravenclaws or similar," she confided after taking a sip of her tea, "and they despair of me, but when the possibility of a field assignment came up they were all reluctant to leave their books and I had my application on my department head's desk before the ink was dry."

"What department is that?" Harry asked curiously.

"Hecatemae Affairs," Hilde replied openly.

Harry felt a little shocked, he had had no idea there was a section of the Ministry dedicated to what he was.

"There's a whole department?" he couldn't help himself; he had to ask.

"Oh yes, there are ten of us at the moment," the woman told him with a smile

There was of course one obvious question left and Harry hesitated, but found himself asking anyway.

"What on earth do you all do?" it seemed incredible that ten people could be occupied when most of the time there wasn't even a live Hecatema to deal with.

It occurred to Harry after he had said it that if taken the wrong way his question might be insulting, but it was too late to take it back.

"Mostly we research," Hilde said, not offended in the least. "The Hecatemae of recent centuries have been quite well documented, but further back things are a little vague. We gather as much information as we can and make sure that we're prepared to help any child train. At the moment the others are rewriting the testing regulations to include male children as well as female. One of your predecessors actually predicted there would be a Hecatemus one day, but no one

believed her. She was two hundred and seventy five at the time and her soul mate had just died so you can understand the department's reluctance to take the prophecy seriously."

Harry was choking on his tea: Draco slapped him on the back helpfully.

"Sorry," he apologised as he managed to breathe again, "I thought you said two hundred and seventy five."

Hilde smiled and nodded.

"I did," she replied cheerfully. "Caitlyn Mugwort I believe her name was. She died soon after she made the prediction: a shame really by all accounts she was an incredible woman. If it hadn't have been for the accident that killed her bond mate her contemporaries believed that she would have made it well into her three hundreds rather than her somewhat average life span."

Harry knew wizards and witches could live a long time, but over three hundred years seemed a little excessive. He went over everything he had read about Hecatemae over the past weeks and tried to figure out if he should know this; he came to the conclusion that it was one of those facts that people in the wizarding world just seemed to know and expected everyone else to know as well.

"People live that long?" Harry asked eventually.

"Hecatemae do, Harry," Dumbledore explained with a smile, "and of course their soul mates; a wizard's lifespan is roughly equivalent to his underlying power since magic prolongs life. You are connected to the raw power around us all which will give you a very long life, baring accidents of course."

[And psychotic Death Eaters,] Draco added dryly.

[You knew this didn't you?] Harry said, still a little shocked.

[Yes,] his soul mate returned, [I'm sorry it's just one of the things we learn, like wizards use wands. It never occurred to me that you wouldn't know.]

[It didn't occur to the authors of the books I've been reading either,] Harry replied. [Three hundred: That's nearly four natural human life spans.]

[We need to get you some better books,] Draco decided firmly.

When Harry had convinced his mind to accept that he could live for over three hundred years, he let his eyes wander back to the other two people in the room. He wished for once that his Muggle upbringing would not leave him ten seconds behind everyone else.

"If you don't mind me asking," Hilde said with a rather intense curious look in her eyes that reminded Harry sharply of Hermione, "how did you learn to shield so quickly? The scenarios we ran at the department estimated a much longer training period."

A gleam appeared in Draco's expression to match Hilde's and the feeling of glee that shot through the Slytherin made Harry very suspicious.

"Positive reinforcement," his lover said brightly.

Harry felt his cheeks go red and heat up as he realised what Draco was alluding to.

"Really?" the woman asked obviously interested. "What kind of positive reinforcement?"

Draco grinned and Harry sent him a glare: Dumbledore's eyes were sparkling with mischief.

[Don't you dare,] Harry warned. He still wasn't used to his lover's casual attitude to talking about sex.

In Harry's world there were people you could talk about sex with and people you couldn't, and in Draco's there did not seem to be a division, especially if they blushed well. His soul mate looked at him innocently and then opened his mouth, at which point Harry pounced and clamped his hand over his lover's lips.

Hilde looked a little startled by the action and Harry gave her rather a weak smile.

"Um," was the most coherent explanation he managed.

After a couple of seconds in this rather awkward tableau with Hilde looking at him oddly her eyes opened slightly and understanding dawned.

"Oh," she said, her face breaking into a surprising grin, "that type of positive reinforcement. I shall not pry further, but definitely an after bonding technique wouldn't you say?"

Harry knew when he was being teased and he let go of Draco and sat back down in his chair heavily: he was doomed he just knew it.

"Sorry, Harry," Hilde said with a sympathetic smile, "I remember what it was like to be seventeen."

"He'll be fine," Draco said unrepentantly, but reached out for Harry's hand anyway, "Harry just has these attacks of Gryffindor bashfulness. I'll train him out of them eventually."

Harry had no choice but to smile at that; he could appreciate it even if he was the butt of the joke. At least the embarrassment appeared to be over for now. Hilde reached down into a bag that was sitting next to her chair and brought out a small box.

"In apology, I have something for you, Harry," the petite woman said warmly. "Draco mentioned you have some trouble in crowds, which is probably to do with your focus. It'll take time to learn the control you'll need, but I think this will help in that aim."

She put the box on the table as Dumbledore helpfully levitated the tea things out of the way, and Harry found himself leaning forward to see before he really thought about it. Draco was right there with him and Harry could tell his soul mate was as interested as he was. However, when Hilde opened the box lid which split into two parts the Slytherin felt oddly disappointed.

"It looks like a kaleidoscope," Draco commented, his voice neutral.

The small crystal sitting on a bed of red satin did not look like any kaleidoscope Harry had ever seen, but he didn't comment.

"Why hasn't it moved yet?" his lover asked, obviously curious.

"Well it is based on the same principle as a kaleidoscope," Hilde said cheerfully, "but the spells are slightly different. It's called a Prisma and it does not automatically move, the user has to make it."

Harry was becoming more confused by the second and decided that he needed an explanation before things became any more complicated.

"Sorry," he said before either Draco or Hilde could continue their discussion, "but what is a kaleidoscope? The ones I've seen before look nothing like that."

Draco was faster than the Hecatemae expert and he sent Harry a whole stream of images of a small box like the one on the table with the crystal hovering above it giving out fabulous patterns and colours.

[It's a child's toy,] his soul mate finished helpfully.

"Oh I see," Harry said aloud, "it does look the same, doesn't it."

Hilde had the vaguely adoring look back in her expression when he faced her again, but as soon as he met her gaze she smiled and it was gone. Harry was reminded that this was probably as weird and wonderful for the Ministry employee as it was for him.

"So how do you make this one move?" Harry asked quickly.

"Meditative focus," Hilde told him cheerfully. "You put your hands either side of it like this," she demonstrated, "and then you concentrate. The sharper your focus the steadier and more elaborate the movements of the crystal will become and the more complex patterns it will produce. The visual feedback makes it much easier to assess your own progress. It was designed by Portia Zola last century specifically to work with Hecatemae minds. Those of us with average brains can get something out of these, but from what I'm given to understand they're only spectacular with Hecatemae."

Harry was very curious and itching to try the new device, but he was also hesitant: he did not want to make an idiot of himself.

"Would you like me to demonstrate?" the woman asked as if she knew exactly how he was feeling.

"Please," Harry admitted before his nerves could get the better of him.

Hilde settled herself squarely in her chair and put her hands either side of the device once more. Her face took on a remarkably serious expression and Harry fixed his eyes on the crystal. At first nothing happened and then suddenly the clear cut stone twitched and Harry found himself smiling for no apparent reason.

Very slowly and more than a little unsteadily the focal stone rose into the air and came to a stop in an almost vertical position. In the centre of the crystal a blue light appeared and slowly made its way towards the edges of the stone in small tendrils. When the luminescence burst out of its container the crystal began to spin and, in doing so, it left trails of blue light behind it. Harry was fascinated,

even if the movement of the stone was a little jerky and uneven, the whole thing was beautiful.

Eventually the crystal slowed and lowered back to the box at which point Hilde gave a self-satisfied sigh.

"That was lovely," Harry said quietly with a little awe in his voice.

"Would you like to try?" the woman offered and pushed the box towards his side of the table.

Harry looked at Draco, still a little unsure and his soul mate smiled.

[I'm sure you can do it,] he said supportively.

Not sure quite what he was doing, Harry glanced at Hilde and then placed his hands either side of the box as she had done.

"Now just focus on the stone," the woman encouraged gently. "Try and think of nothing else."

The problem was Harry's mind was not a quiet place: his brain was concentrating on several things at the same time. He had to maintain his shield constantly even through much of that was instinctive now, and focusing on one single thing was nearly impossible. For a frustrating few seconds he stared at the stone and absolutely nothing happened. Then Draco gently placed a hand on Harry back and suddenly clarity occurred.

The crystal leapt off its silken bed into the air and began to spin instantly. All sorts of colours flowed out of it sending what looked like tiny fireworks into the surrounding area. It was incredible and it filled Harry with a simple joy. He became completely captivated with it and his eyes would not leave the crystal at all.

[Let it go, love,] Draco's voice sounded in his mind, [put it back. That's enough for now.]

At his lover's insistence the Gryffindor let the stone fall back into the box and blinked to bring reality back into focus.

"Wow," was his undisguised opinion on the matter.

"I quite agree," said Hilde with a smile. "I don't think you're going to have any problem with this, Harry."

The young man smiled back and realised that his nervousness was completely gone. He was pretty sure he liked this rather strange woman.

[I told you she was nice,] Draco said smugly.

Chapter 17 Consequences

Draco had his nose in Harry's latest potions essay when the morning owls arrived. He refused to write anything for his soul mate, but he had no problem with helping Harry improve and he was so engrossed in making notes on the parchment that he had to be nudged before he noticed there was a very familiar bird sitting on the table in front of him. For a second Draco did not move and the owl glared at him and did not appear pleased to be sitting on the Gryffindor table.

[Mother's owl,] he said silently and slowly reached for the letter attached to the bird's leg.

He undid it as he perfected an air of indifference and hoped that few of the other pupils had been watching his momentary lapse. Harry shifted uneasily beside him and gently placed a supportive hand on his leg, unobtrusively under the table.

Trying to appear as if it was any other morning and any other owl Draco unrolled the parchment as the bird flew off with a screech. He recognised his mother's handwriting immediately and the Malfoy seal at the top of the letter: he knew almost instantly what was coming.

The correspondence was long and as Draco read he recognised his father's words. It was his mother's hand but definitely Lucius' scathing reaction to his liaison with Harry. The letter made reference to everything his father had ever found lacking in his son and spoke at length about how disappointed the family had always been, but that was not what really bothered Draco. He had heard the diatribe before, even when he was the favoured child, and he had become immune to it; what was new were the last few sentences.

"You have dishonoured the Malfoy name for the last time. From this moment you are disinherited and disowned. Never will your name be spoken in my house again."

He was without family and without any visible means of support of his own. Draco had been expecting this letter since the moment the truth became known, but it did not make it any easier to bear. What hurt the most was that it was his mother's hand: even if she had only been writing what his father dictated, she had still written it and it was painful to know she shared Lucius' opinion. Although he knew Harry would always be there for him Draco suddenly came to the realisation that the foundations of his old life had been completely ripped away. It was an insecure feeling and he hated to feel insecure.

[I will never leave you,] Harry's voice was firm in his mind, as was the sudden explosion of love his soul mate sent him.

[I know,] Draco replied, but was unable to return the gesture and keep up the emotionless facade on the outside.

He would not show weakness in front of others and Harry knew this and did not push. Draco Malfoy might be without wealth and family name, but he was still a Slytherin. For the rest of the hall who were either openly watching or surreptitiously glancing in his direction he had to make a statement.

Taking out his wand he pointed it at the letter and said calmly, "Incendio," at which point the parchment burst in to flames. With exaggerated care Draco placed the burning document on his nearly empty plate and made a dismissive gesture.

"Mother sends her love," he said lightly and then went back to examining Harry's essay.

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Harry waited until they returned to their room at lunchtime to gather their things for the afternoon lessons. Then and only then, once they were alone did he broach the subject of the letter, even when they could have had a perfectly private conversation whenever they liked. It had been more difficult than Harry liked to believe to stay silent, but he had known that Draco would react badly if he broached the subject anywhere but somewhere they could be completely alone.

"You are allowed to be upset," he said finally, when he could stand the silent denial from his lover no more.

Draco looked at him blandly from where he was examining the bookcase that stood in the corner of their room. There was a momentary feeling of loss from his soul mate, but it was squashed so quickly that if Harry had not been looking for it he would have missed it.

"Harry," Draco said calmly, "I've been expecting that letter since the moment I climbed onto the Slytherin table and jumped across the hall."

"But it must still have been nasty," Harry insisted, knowing that the emotions were there somewhere even if Draco refused to acknowledge them. "You've just been cut off from what you've known your entire life."

He was rewarded for trying to understand with a patient sigh: Draco obviously had denial down to a fine art.

"I cut myself off, Love," the apparently composed Slytherin said, as if he was explaining to someone who couldn't possibly understand. "All the letter did was make what I knew was true official."

Harry frowned, knowing that he was talking to a brick wall. He knew Draco was not as calm as he pretended to be, but Harry was also aware that admitting to such a weakness, even to himself and his soul mate would not be easy for his lover. Draco was cut off from his entire original support system, but the Slytherin part of him was well trained and he was suppressing everything. Draco needed comfort, Harry knew that without a doubt and he needed a way in.

"Draco it has to be bothering you," he tried to push, but knew he didn't stand a chance.

At the nudge Draco's face went blank and he turned back to the books as if they were very important to him. Harry knew he was banging his head against a very solid piece of rock and there was only one thing he could think to do.

"Okay," he said and walked up behind his soul mate, "it's not bothering you, but can we just agree it's bothering me."

And with that he put his arms around his lover and pulled him close. At first Draco stiffened with resistance, but eventually his soul mate relaxed back into Harry's arms. There was a genuine feeling of love coming off him and even if he could not admit that he was the one in pain he could share that emotion with

Harry. As Draco let Harry in, he could feel the insecurity that under laid his lover's current mood of denial, but he did not comment on it. It did, however, spark an idea in his mind.

It was the insecurity that was stopping Draco admitting to anything else he might be feeling and Harry knew exactly how he could make his lover overcome that emotion. Draco was without his own means of support which undermined part of the fundamental character of the Slytherin; Harry realised he had to give it back to his lover and he began to form a plan.

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Their first Quidditch match of the season was always a high point for a house and as usual everyone turned out. For only the second year in his life at Hogwarts, Harry found himself in the stands and perversely he was more nervous than he ever had been on a broom. If he was nervous for Gryffindor's new Seeker, or for his broom that the fourth year was riding, he was not quite sure, but Draco kept making fun of him none-the-less.

It was not unprecedented for the Captain of the house team not to play: there had been one incident about thirty years previously when the Ravenclaw team captain had been injured in a practise session and been unable to play all year but retained his position. Hogwarts had never had a team captain who was prohibited from playing for any other reason before, but the Gryffindor team had point blank refused to let Harry quit so he was stuck with the title. He felt a little like a mascot, but since the team would be flying his strategies it wasn't as if he didn't have some input into the game.

Draco for his part was in the stands with the Gryffindor supporters, but was resolutely wearing his own house colours with pride.

"We're going to cream your lot," Draco told Harry cheerfully as they leant over the edge of the stand with the other supporters.

"In your dreams," he responded automatically.

"Well you should know," Draco said with a grin.

They were down one end of the Gryffindor supporters with Draco between Harry and the rest of the mass of pupils, and Hermione and Neville beyond the very protective Slytherin. When a couple of fifth years had tried to stand behind them Draco had given them such a glare that the pair had virtually run to the other end of the stand. Harry couldn't help admitting that his soul mate having a reputation for being a vengeful bastard did have its uses.

"Players ready," Madame Hooch's clear tones rang out across the field, "I want a clean match."

Harry and Draco looked at each other and laughed: a clean match between Gryffindor and Slytherin just didn't happen, ever.

The whistle sounded and the match began: it was fast and furious. Slytherin took an early lead thanks to a deadly paced run by their lead chaser. There were a few disgruntled looks from the Gryffindor supporters when Draco cheered the goal, but he grinned at them unrepentantly. Harry had only just managed to stop himself cheering as well since he was as caught up with Draco's emotions as his own, but fortunately he avoided that embarrassment.

[Harry Potter, captain of Gryffindor cheering for Slytherin, now that would be something to see,] Draco commented as his eyes returned to the game.

[About as unheard of as Draco Malfoy cheering for Gryffindor,] Harry returned unable to worry about the potential slip up because he was enjoying himself so much.

The six-year intense rivalry between them had turned into friendly baiting and Harry found it highly entertaining. When Gryffindor scored an answering goal Draco almost joined the rest of the stand in jumping up and down. When he looked at Harry his eyes were sparkling with amusement and Harry took it as a challenge.

[First one to cheer for the wrong house gets to tidy the room for the next week,] he said brightly.

[You're on,] Draco replied with an evil grin.

They both spent the next half an hour going completely mental whenever their team scored in an attempt to make their other-half slip up. Harry was absolutely positive he was doing a better job at keeping his mind on his own team, but when he said so Draco just raised an eyebrow at him. The next time he attempted to illustrate the point it was so close that even Draco had to admit it and the two ended up laughing like loons.

"What are you two giggling about?" Hermione asked as a gap in the game occurred.

"Nearly had Draco cheering for our side," Harry told her with a huge grin.

"Just waiting for you to let your guard down, Potter," his soul mate replied challengingly, but broke into a grin of his own pretty quickly.

Gryffindor were twenty points ahead of Slytherin, which meant there was everything to play for and both young men were rooting for their teams.

"You two are just strange," was Neville's comment on the proceedings.

Harry looked at Draco who looked back and then they both turned to their friends.

"We know," they said at exactly the same time with matching smiles.

Hermione found this very funny and giggled cheerfully before turning to the pitch and waving at Ron in his keeper position. The game started again and everyone turned their attention back to it. Five minutes later Harry saw the glint of gold that he'd been trained to look for, for six years.

[Snitch,] he said silently to Draco and flashed his lover an image of where it was.

[Blennim's seen it,] Draco said excitedly as the Slytherin Seeker shot off at speed.

[So's Spari,] Harry said a second later as the Gryffindor Seeker also powered towards the spot and the crowd went wild.

The two Seekers flew through the air at breakneck speed as their supporters cheered them on. Both Draco and Harry saw Slytherin's Seeker's mistake at the same time and as one yelled "Duck!"

Just in time the boy seemed to remember that there were other things he had to think about as well as the snitch and he swerved out of the way of the bludger coming straight for his head. His path took him into the line of the Gryffindor Seeker who pulled up sharply and the crowd groaned as the snitch was lost in the confusion.

"Warning the Slytherin Seeker," Draco commented dryly, "if I wasn't in such a good mood I'd say that counted as cheering."

"It so does not," Harry protested as his lover looked at him with a superior quirk to his features, "it's just good manners."

"Manners have no place in Quidditch," Draco shot back lightly.

"Maybe not for a Slytherin," Harry replied, only half paying attention to the game.

"So that's all I am to you now," Draco said in a mock petulant tone, "your token Slytherin."

Harry would have laughed, but he caught something out of the corner of his eye and the gasp from the crowd alerted him as well. Turning back towards the game he raised his hand on instinct and the bludger that was hurtling towards his head stopped millimetres from his fingers, spinning in mid air. Harry stared at it stupidly for a few seconds unsure of what he was doing, or why the ball was just hovering there. A hush had come over the Gryffindor stand.

Madame Hooch's whistle sounded loudly.

"Penalty against Slytherin for bumphing," she called into the air. "If we could have our bludger back, Mr Potter."

Harry would have loved to oblige, but he had no idea how to send the ball back the way it had come. All he knew was that if he moved his hand the bludger would continue its course straight at his head.

[I don't know how to send it back,] he told Draco, a little panicked by the situation.

His lover came to his rescue pulling out his wand and banishing the ball at speed so that is barely missed the Slytherin Beater who had sent it in their direction.

"Try that again, Gunner," Draco yelled at the green uniformed player, "and I won't miss."

The anger running through his soul mate was more than apparent to Harry although the shock of the situation had deprived him of any annoyance himself.

[Thanks,] he said honestly as Draco looked at him critically to make sure he was okay.

[What I'm here for,] Draco replied without thinking about it.

Thankfully Madame Hooch's whistle went to restart the game so the crowd went back to watching the players rather than Harry.

"You okay?" Hermione asked as everyone else lost interest.

"Yeah, fine," Harry replied honestly.

"What did you do?" the young woman asked, ever the information seeker. "I thought for sure that bludger was going to take your head off."

"I have no idea," he admitted with a shrug, replaying the events in his head.

"Useful anyway," Neville commented, his eyes straying back to the game. "That was a foul, I'm sure that was a foul. Harry don't you think that was a foul?"

The Gryffindor supporters appeared to agree as a boo went round the crowd, but Madame Hooch did not concur, Harry found himself drawn back to the game even if his thoughts were still reeling.

[We'll talk about this later,] Draco said silently as the Harry tried to concentrate back on the match.

[Okay,] he agreed, not sure it would make any difference, but willing to let his lover have his way.

In five minutes they were both back to cheering their teams along. Slytherin were ten points ahead when Spari went shooting off towards the opposite end of the pitch to most of the players.

"The Gryffindor Seeker has seen the snitch," the commentator yelled excitedly.

As soon as Spari showed her hand the Slytherin Seeker was after her, but the newly serviced Firebolt was too fast for Blennim. The two Seekers shot all over the pitch, but the green clad player never quite caught the red clad Gryffindor. The crowd erupted in cheers as Spari's fingers closed over the golden ball. Harry totally forgot the earlier incident as he went nuts with them.

Chapter 18 Resolutions and Allergies

Harry read through his latest correspondence from Bill Weasley and glanced over the figures on the report that had come with it. Everyone knew that Harry was well off thanks to the money his parents had left him, but most people thought he was just living off the capital. However, after his investment in Weasleys Wizards Wheezes had turned out to be so successful it had given him the idea to look into other options; Bill had been the first person he thought of and had been managing Harry's money for a generous retainer ever since.

Thanks to the sound advice of the eldest Weasley son and an inordinate amount of luck, Harry had increased his family fortune quite substantially. He never mentioned it to anyone and even Draco did not have any idea of how much was in the Gringotts' vault, but with the plans Harry had set in motion he soon would.

Draco was still firmly in denial and was refusing to admit that anything was wrong so Harry was using the time to sort everything out. He had owled the bank at the first opportunity about changes he wanted to make to his account and now he had a stack of forms to fill in. Banking when goblins were involved was a very paranoid, bureaucratic affair, but for once Harry did not mind having to sign everything in triplicate.

"That is a large stack of parchment," Draco commented as he wandered into their room from the stairway.

"Just stuff from the bank," Harry said with a smile, as if everything was completely ordinary, "investments and stuff."

His soul mate looked surprised and then interested.

"You have investments?" Draco asked curiously, but before Harry could answer his lover frowned and turned away.

For just a second Draco had forgotten that he was supposed to not be thinking about money or wealth or anything to do with family history and Harry realised this. If asked, Harry was willing to explain exactly what he was doing, but he knew Draco was not about to do that.

"Ron's brother Bill manages them," he said as if it was nothing at all, "every now and then he sends me stuff to sign; boring really."

Draco gave a very noncommittal reply and Harry sent his soul mate a mental hug before he went back to the forms. Ticking boxes and scratching his name in various places, he kept his mind firmly on mundane matters and looked forward to the surprise he was going to give his lover.

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It took three days for everything to go through and then a red-ribboned certificate arrived for Harry on the talons of a large eagle owl accompanied by a letter. He opened the letter and scanned it quickly, just checking that nothing had gone wrong. Draco was chatting to Hermione where they were sitting with the other Gryffindor seventh years at breakfast when Harry placed the certificate next to his lover's plate.

"What's this?" Draco asked curiously.

He felt intrigued but Harry just smiled at him.

"It's for you," he said quietly.

"Harry, wasn't that an official Gringotts owl?" Hermione asked conversationally from the other side of Draco.

Harry nodded openly.

"Lost all your cash on a bad Quidditch bet?" Seamus joked from across the table, having heard the tail end of the conversation.

"No," Harry replied with a grin, "I've just been making a few changes to my account. Which, by the way, is none of your business."

The Irish Gryffindor beamed at him cheerfully and raised his juice goblet in an unrepentant salute. Harry turned back to Draco to find that his soul mate had picked up the parchment and was looking at it as if it might bite.

[This is about all those forms you were filling in isn't it? What did you do?] the blond youth asked silently.

[Open it and see,] Harry replied warmly.

Looking at his soul mate suspiciously Draco pulled on the ribbon and slowly unrolled the official document. As Harry watched his soul mate began to read, keeping the parchment where only he could see it. Draco's expression went from curious, through disbelieving to amazed, and then his features were warring with several different emotions at the same time. Draco looked at Harry and the Hecatemus could feel the confusion in him.

[I ... ah,] his mental voice was as confused as his feelings. [Harry you didn't have to.]

[What's mine is yours,] Harry replied firmly, sending all his love with the thought. [All I've done is made official what was already true. The account is ours now, yours and mine. My parents left it for me and now I'm sharing it with you: I think they would have approved. You should have your own key by next week, but that takes a little longer.]

Draco looked back at the paper again and then over at him.

[Harry,] Draco said slowly, [is this number right?]

Just to make sure Harry leaned over and peered at the bottom of the parchment and then nodded. He could not quite identify the feeling coming from his lover after that.

[I know you told me you had plenty of money,] Draco said very precisely as if he was trying to avoid something, [but, Harry, you never mentioned you were richer than half the pureblood families.]

Harry looked at his soul mate in surprise: this was news to him.

[I didn't know,] he said honestly, it had never occurred to him how much was filthy rich in wizarding circles.

He had been aware that he was well provided for and Bill had done a great job of increasing his wealth, but it had not occurred to him he could complete with some of the purebloods.

[I love you, Harry,] Draco said with a shake of his head and a half smile as he rolled up the parchment, [never, ever, change.]

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Harry was peering very hard at the writing in his textbook and he still couldn't quite make sense of the instruction he was supposed to be following. The way he read it he had to cut up the ginger root, add it to the juniper berry pulp and then somehow chop it up even though he'd just done that, which couldn't be right. Much to some of his teachers' delights and some of his teacher's disgust his marks had shot up over the beginning of the year, but that didn't mean he suddenly found everything easy. Potions was still his hardest subject and it caused him problems.

[Draco,] he asked eventually, [what does this actually mean?]

He sent his soul mate a quick flash of the paragraph in question knowing that Draco would have the answer. The problem with the particular potion they were working on was that the recipe was very old and hence the language it was using was not very straightforward. Why no one had bothered to translate the instructions when they put it in the text book was a question that made Harry wonder if the wizarding world would ever make it into the twentieth century, let alone the twenty first.

[Chop the ginger,] Draco replied efficiently without even pausing what he was doing at the other end of the bench, [add it to the juniper and then transfer both to the pestle and mortar and crush them together until they're a paste. They won't mix properly otherwise.]

It always made so much sense when his soul mate explained it; sometimes Harry wished he was as good at his other subjects as Defence Against the Dark Arts. Being in mortal peril always seemed so much easier than remembering to add the mugwort before the dandelion. Harry followed the instructions carefully and added the ingredients to his cauldron, watching the mixture go from brown to pinkish orange; so far so good.

Next he reached for a small jar which contained an off white powder: it was ground dragon's tooth and if Harry understood it correctly was the ingredient which would give the flame repelling potion its fundamental magical properties. The recipe only required a very little and so he picked up the scales he and Draco were sharing and placed them on the desk in front of him.

[You have to let it simmer for a few minutes before you add that,] his lover warned as he glanced over.

[I know,] Harry promised with a smile, [I was just going to measure it out. I don't want to miss the right point to add it.]

[You know, maybe there is hope for you yet,] Draco replied lightly.

[Not all of us can be geniuses like you,] he returned with a laugh and unscrewed the top of the little pot he was holding.

[I know,] his soul mate replied dramatically, [sometimes I wonder how the world keeps turning without me.]

"Mr Malfoy, Mr Potter, no chit chat," Snape's cool tones drifted over the classroom, "you are here to learn, not to prattle on at each other."

The Potions master had developed a nasty habit of being able to tell exactly when Harry and Draco were talking even when they were doing it silently. Snape was the only one besides their closest friends and Dumbledore who seemed to be able to do this and it was very annoying.

"Sorry, Professor," Draco said smoothly, "we were discussing the potion."

"That may all be very well, Mr Malfoy," Snape said evenly, "but you know the rules. In this classroom if you wish to converse with Mr Potter about the lesson do so out loud."

"Yes, sir," Draco replied, much to Harry's pleasure handling the whole situation with his usual charm, "sometimes we forget."

Snape fixed Harry with a stare and he knew who was receiving the blame for that one, but before either he or the Professor could say anything about that, Harry gave an almighty sneeze. The young wizard had just taken the top off the ground dragon's tooth and he hurriedly put it back on again as another sneeze threatened. This one nearly dislodged his glasses and he scrabbled in his pockets to try and find a handkerchief. Three sneezes later his nose was itching like mad and his eyes were streaming.

[Harry, are you okay?] Draco did not seem to be considering the rules.

[I just can't stop,] another sneeze interrupted all thought. [Sneezing,] he finished lamely.

"Mr Potter, is there a problem?" Snape had risen to his feet and was walking down the classroom.

Harry sneezed again and tried to figure out if he'd done anything stupid. The potions master picked up the half closed pot of off white power and looked at it with his eyebrow raised as Harry sneezed again.

"Did you inhale this?" Snape asked coolly.

Harry shook his head.

"I," sneeze, "barely got," sneeze, "the top off," sneeze.

"I was watching him, sir," Draco added his point of view to the conversation, "Harry didn't breathe it in."

Harry tried to keep his eyes on Snape between sneezes which were giving no sign of abating: the man appeared thoughtful.

"An allergy then," the professor did not sound sympathetic.

"But I've," sneeze, "never been allergic," sneeze, "to dragon's," sneeze, "tooth before," Harry said as quickly as he could manage and sneezed again.

It was then that something hit Snape on the back of the head. Harry saw the man's hair move and then the professor spun on the spot looking furious. A small globule of essence of unicorn milk fell from Snape's shoulder and landed with a splat on the floor. A few desks away sat an astounded looking Pansy Parkinson and an empty crucible. If it had been a Gryffindor, Harry was sure house points would have been falling, but since Pansy was a Slytherin Snape did not fly off the handle instantly.

"Miss Parkinson," the professor began in a very low tone.

Harry sneezed again, leaning over to try and catch his breath.

"Ugh," came from Draco's direction and Harry turned to see more of the essence of unicorn milk as it oozed off his lover's robe.

The sound had drawn Snape's attention and he rounded on Harry again. A very nasty suspicion entered his head as Harry felt another sneeze coming on. The moment it exploded from his nose he saw something out of the corner of his eye and with Quidditch trained reflexes grabbed his textbook and held it up just in time to catch another flying globule coming straight at him.

"Potter," Snape said dangerously.

"I'm not doing anything," Harry insisted, pleased that he could finally produce a whole sentence, but knowing there was another sneeze on the way.

Draco intercepted the next soggy missile when it arrived using his chopping board.

"Get out," Snape almost roared and Harry did not bother to argue, after all it did seem the sensible thing to do.

When the next sneeze came he was halfway to the door and he ducked, at which point the essence of unicorn milk hit one of his fellow Gryffindors in the chest.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor," Snape yelled as Harry fled the room.

It took twenty minutes, a trip to the hospital wing and an anti allergy potion from Madame Pomfrey for Harry to stop sneezing. Of course the story of Harry Potter and the incredible flying unicorn milk was all over the school by the end of the day at which point he found himself summoned to the headmaster's study. He and Draco made their way there just before dinner.

Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape were standing on opposite sides of Dumbledore's domain when the two young men walked in.

"Headmaster," Harry's house mistress was saying pointedly, "I do not see how it can be considered fair or just to remove house points for what is clearly no one's fault, and so many at that."

"The incident disrupted the entire class," Snape returned coolly. "If Potter had simply alerted me to the fact that he was allergic to any of the ingredients it would not have happened."

"Ah, Harry, Draco," Dumbledore greeted in his usual manner and interrupted the two house heads, "thank you for coming."

Professor McGonagall smiled at Harry warmly and Snape glared at him and the young man wondered for the hundredth time why everything had to happen in the potions master's lessons.

"I believe we can clear this up quite quickly," the headmaster said brightly. "Harry, did you know you were allergic to ground dragon's tooth?"

"No, Professor," he replied honestly, "I've used it before with no problem. I really don't understand what happened today."

Dumbledore smiled at him as if he had said exactly the right thing.

"There you are, Severus," the headmaster said cheerfully, "it was all just an accident. I'm sure Harry's very sorry that it happened, aren't you, Harry?"

"Yes, sir, very sorry," Harry replied on cue.

"Don't you think it might be a good idea to rethink the house points," the headmaster continued, "especially as it would be a shame for two houses to lose so many at the same time."

Snape stood up straight and took notice of that: he looked annoyed and suspicious.

"Two houses?" the potions master asked coolly.

"I'm afraid that if you penalise Harry, we shall be forced to penalise Draco as well," Dumbledore said in a very reasonable tone. "In school rules as well as in law they are considered to be the same person, rewards and penalties meted out to both equally."

Harry thought Snape might burst a blood vessel the way the vein on his temple throbbed.

[Well played,] was Draco's comment on the situation and there was genuine admiration in his voice.

"In light of the fact that it was an unfortunate accident," Snape said slowly through clenched teeth, "I can see that maybe I was slightly hasty. The house points should be restored," he paused, "but," Harry did not like the sound of that, "to avoid future accidents," Snape stressed the word 'accidents', "I must insist that Mr Potter be tested for any other unforeseen allergies, since his condition appears to create irregular phenomenon."

Somehow Snape's suggestion sounded decidedly unpleasant.

[Snape's on his game,] Draco appeared to be enjoying this far too much.

[He's going to try and poison me, you realise that don't you,] Harry replied. [Remember when I suffer you suffer.]

[Dumbledore will never allow anything like that,] his soul mate replied calmly, [just enjoy the show.]

"A very good idea, Severus," the headmaster said to Harry's horror and the young wizard looked at Draco in desperation, "it would be unfortunate if

something like this were to occur again. I'll have Madame Pomfrey arrange it, would you mind assisting her with the substance supplies?"

[Albus Dumbledore has the snitch,] his very Slytherin lover said in Harry's head.

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Draco watched with sympathy as Harry held out his arm for yet another noxious substance to be place on the small patch of skin Madame Pomfrey had prepared for the purpose. At least it wasn't as barbaric as the Muggle way; Harry had explained how when he was eight he had been dragged to a Muggle doctor with a suspicion of a peanut allergy and it sounded horrendous. Having small cuts made all up your arm and then having various substances dropped on the cuts sounded prehistoric.

Madame Pomfrey had sat Harry down and charmed a square of skin on the Gryffindor's arm to glow if anything touched it that interfered with Harry's magical field. Since it was the magical properties of the substances that had caused the last adverse reaction this was the information the healer was interested in. There were anti allergy potions at the ready just in case, but if everything went smoothly it was unlikely they'd be needed.

The continual use of the charm to prepare the patch of skin was grating on Harry's nerves, but other than that, as far as Draco could tell, his lover was suffering no adverse effects.

[How many so far?] Harry's mental voice asked silently.

[Twenty-three,] Draco replied without thinking and then sent Harry a curious glance. [How did you know I was counting?]

That at least drew a slight smile from the besieged wizard as yet another potion's ingredient failed to do anything but take up time.

[You always keep track of the details,] Harry replied and Draco could feel his lover bracing himself for the cleansing spell Madame Pomfrey was employing. [I'm going to go insane if this takes much longer.]

[But at least once this is done there shouldn't be anymore unwanted episodes in Snape's class,] Draco pointed out, trying to find the positive aspect of the situation.

A snort of laughter was the reply to that opinion and Harry received a penetrating look from Madame Pomfrey for his outburst.

"Anything wrong, Mr Potter?" the healer enquired in her usual business-like tone.

"No, Madame Pomfrey," Harry replied with a smile and an innocent expression that could have won an award, "thank you. Draco said something funny."

The witch glanced in his direction and Draco gave her a polite smile.

"I was commenting on how at least once this is over Harry should not cause any more incidents in Potions," Draco explained since he had no reason to hide the comment and did not wish to antagonise Madame Pomfrey. "He seemed to think that was funny."

"I think it's my destiny to cause incidents in Potions," Harry responded. "I doubt this will make much difference."

"But it will prevent any, possibly nasty, adverse reactions," Madame Pomfrey said calmly and picked up the next small container.

Draco watched Harry sober at the comment and he doubted that his lover had considered the possibility that his condition could cause anything dangerous to occur. Nasty ideas had been running about in Draco's head ever since Snape had suggested the testing, but he had tried to dismiss them.

[It's highly unlikely that an allergy could cause a big problem,] he told his soul mate before Harry could ask the questions that Draco knew were building up in his brain. [This is just Snape's vindictiveness, nothing more.]

The slight frown on Harry's face relaxed until it was almost imperceptible, but it did not go away completely.

There were four sets of substances being tried and so far Madame Pomfrey had been through those from animals, and half of those from plants. The other two categories were mineral and toxic. The toxic substances would not be placed on Harry's skin, but the healer was going to expose the Gryffindor to them in a close enough proximity to affect his magical aura. Draco was not looking forward to that part at all: he was already sitting on his hands so he couldn't be tempted to whip out his wand to defend Harry. He had a reasonable handle on his instincts, but it never hurt to be careful.

For a few minutes the pair did not converse and Draco went back to counting tests. It was as Madame Pomfrey placed a tiny spot of something sticky on Harry's arm he felt a shift. If he hadn't been concentrating very hard on Harry he never would have noticed anything, but since his soul mate was all he was focusing on, Draco spotted it instantly. Harry had also noticed something because he looked up and locked gazed with his lover.

"I think..." Harry said uncomfortably, but that was all he managed to say.

The Hecatemus hiccupped once and the pillow on the bed on which he was sitting exploded in a burst of feathers. The white down flew up into the air and proceeded to rain down over the whole area as the three occupants of the hospital wing remained like statues.

"The sap of the singing willow," Madame Pomfrey said evenly, as if she was not being covered with feathers.

Draco found it hard to repress a smirk as he recovered from the shock of the explosion and viewed the quite ridiculous scene before him. He doubted that even Snape could have pulled off aloof and superior with white duck down gently settling on his head and Madame Pomfrey definitely couldn't.

"Sorry," Harry said quietly, blinking at the healer apologetically.

"Not to worry, Mr Potter," Madame Pomfrey replied in her normal tone, "this is, after all, why we are here."

The woman picked up one of the vials of potion sitting in the rack beside her, unstoppered it and handed it to Harry.

"Drink this," she said calmly, "and then you may assist me in removing these feathers from my hospital wing before we begin again."

Harry grimaced as he did as he was told and Draco was very glad that they did not share all experiences. It would take fifteen minutes for the anti allergy potion to clean out Harry's system and then dissipate so they had some time on their hands. Normally a mess like the feathers could be cleared up with a swish of a wand, but with so many substances in close proximity an encompassing spell like that would be a very bad idea. That meant the avian snow fall was going to have to be cleaned up by hand.

"You too, Mr Malfoy," Madame Pomfrey said evenly just as Draco tried to think up some excuse to not have to get down on his hands and knees to pick up feathers. "Since you are here you may as well make yourself useful."

With an unimpressed look in Harry's direction he slowly stood up: manual labour was not his idea of a fun Sunday afternoon.

[I would like to lodge an official protest,] Draco said as he surveyed the devastation, [I am here purely as moral support.]

[Say that out loud,] Harry commented and also stood up.

Draco fixed his lover with a superior stare.

[I may object,] he said, a grin gracing his features, [but I am not suddenly insane. There are only a few people in this world who frighten me and Madame Pomfrey is one of them.]

[You and the rest of the world,] Harry agreed and began scooping feathers off the bed as the healer in question began removing the offending items from her tray of supplies. [Now if Madame Pomfrey wanted to rule the world and not Voldemort we'd be in real trouble.]

Draco pulled a feather out of his hair and looked at it contemptuously before flicking it at his soul mate.

[If Madame Pomfrey wanted to the rule the world,] he replied lightly, [the world would take its medicine quietly and surrender.]

Chapter 19 Lessons

"Welcome," Hilde greeted brightly as Harry and Draco entered her room for what was supposed to be their first in-depth training session. "Please have a seat. I thought we might spend the first part of the evening getting to know each other properly."

Draco was not sure he liked that idea, but he kept his expression calmly neutral and took the offered seat after Harry sat down. The energetic woman would be useful and she was pleasant in a Hufflepuff type of way, but she was definitely not in the 'trust with our innermost secrets' category.

"I may have had my head in a library for the past couple of years," Hilde continued speaking cheerfully, "but I am aware that your relations with the Ministry have not always been, shall we say, friendly, Harry. Hence I suspect I am not as welcome as I could have been."

The way the woman seemed to pick up on Draco's objections to her presence before he voiced them was beginning to unnerve the Slytherin. For his part, Harry was looking at her intently. Draco felt his soul mate adjusting his barriers and realised that Harry was not about to take any chances and had decided to use his gifts.

"I hope you don't mind," Harry said politely, "but I'm reading you."

"Not at all," Hilde replied with a smile, "I was about to suggest it actually."

If it had been up to him Draco would not have told her that Harry had her under surveillance, as it were, but it was too late now. He did like Hilde, she had a pleasant personality, but paranoia was a way of life for Draco and he wanted to be sure that she would not betray them to the Ministry, either deliberately or accidentally. They were living in dangerous times.

"Would you care for some refreshment?" the woman asked cheerfully. "I hesitate to offer tea, but it seems to be a tradition around here. I have butterbeer if you would prefer."

Both young men nodded their assent at the same time; Draco for one was incredibly pleased not to have to worry about politely sipping tea yet again. There was something to be said for having a device to hide behind and a missile to throw, but at that moment those were the only good things he could think of to do with tea. The great British drink had its place, but the entire staff of Hogwarts seemed to survive on the stuff. Maybe the house elves put something in it.

"Why did you decide to study Hecatemae?" Harry asked the question with his usual innocent tone as Hilde produced three butterbeers.

The woman frowned for a moment in thought as she passed out the drinks and Draco watched her carefully. So far Hilde was giving no signs of subterfuge.

"We had a guest DADA teacher, Professor Laramie, for a few months when I was in my sixth year," the ex-Hufflepuff began eventually, sitting back in her chair, "and she gave some fascinating lectures. There were a few of us who were rather taken with her stories."

To Draco's amusement Hilde blushed as she admitted that.

"Well you know Hufflepuffs," the woman continued, "in for a knut, in for a galleon. We convinced her to set up a club where she could teach us about more than just dark creatures. One evening she told us all about her great, great, great grandmother: Eliza Puddleton and her bond mate Michael Charmers. Well it was the most romantic thing I had ever heard. I knew a little about Hecatemae, but after that I searched everywhere for information. I even did my final year History of Magic essay on the influence of a Hecatema on the Goblin Wars."

Hilde paused thoughtfully, taking a sip of her butterbeer.

"Once I get an idea in my head it's almost impossible to shift it," the witch explained honestly. "Probably another reason I was a Hufflepuff. I admit that I may have been a little obsessed."

Draco couldn't help but smile at that; the woman was so likeable and Harry appeared to believe her completely.

"There was only one place I wanted to work and I don't think Dr Anquiro, my superior, quite knew what hit him when I applied," Hilde told them with a smile. "Possibly the two hundred and fifty page thesis I handed to him the moment I walked in the door was a bit much."

That made Harry laugh and Draco could feel his lover's amusement through their bond. He could also tell that Harry was relaxing, although his soul mate had not fully restored his shields yet.

"How long have you been working there?" Draco asked conversationally.

"Nearly fifteen years," Hilde replied openly. "Until the news about Harry reached us I was working on one of the ancient manuscripts. It was found just after the last fall of Whatsit when the property of one of his Death Eaters was confiscated. We've been..."

She stopped talking as she realised both Draco and Harry were staring at her. The woman looked confused.

"Was it something I said?" she asked, appearing genuinely worried.

"Actually, yes," Draco said honestly.

That of course didn't clear up the situation, but then he had never been known for his straightforward manner.

"I've never heard Voldemort referred to as 'Whatsit', before," Harry said, his smile reappearing. "Sorry, you were saying?"

"Oh," Hilde said with a nod and a grin and then she launched into a detailed account of how her department went about preserving and restoring old documents to further their research.

Draco was not sure the woman wasn't a Ravenclaw rather than a Hufflepuff as she waxed lyrical. If it hadn't been for the fact that she kept dropping in little anecdotes all the time, he would have sworn she was one of the book worms. It was only as the Slytherin found himself grinning at yet another story of how the woman had caused complete chaos in her department that Draco realised he had been letting his guard down. He was impressed; Hilde, it appeared, knew how to manipulate a situation.

In this case Draco did not want Hilde to think she had them right where she wanted them and he let his smile fade and his features harden slightly. He did not want to give her the impression that she was completely unwelcome, but he could not give her his trust yet either. At his reaction Hilde looked between Draco and Harry and for a moment an understanding, almost sympathetic expression crossed her face. It rather contrasted with what she had just been saying and Harry paused in the reply he was giving. Draco found himself the subject of attention of two pairs of eyes.

"Is there anything I can do to make you trust me?" Hilde asked without the slightest trace of recrimination in her voice as she looked directly into his face.

"I don't know," Draco replied honestly.

Trust was not something he ever gave away easily and there were far too many factors counting against Hilde for him to allow her the status of confidant so soon. Surprisingly the woman seemed to realise this and did not resent it. For his part, Harry watched the exchange without commenting and from the feelings of curiosity and calmness coming from him, he appeared to be perfectly willing to accept Draco's stance on the matter.

"Ah well," Hilde said with a resigned smile; not quite the reaction the Slytherin was expecting, "it was worth a try."

"You did not invite us here expecting me to trust you, did you?" Draco voiced the conclusion the woman's words created in his mind.

He was beginning to believe that Hilde was more devious than he had originally given her credit for. This woman may have been a Hufflepuff, but she appeared to have traits from all of the other houses as well. Hilde's smile faded and she looked from Harry to Draco and back again calmly.

"The position of instructor is an honoured one," she said completely seriously with all trace of humour gone from her tone, "and one which must have complete trust. Normally this trust would be built up over years as a child grew and was trained, but due to our stupidity and lack of foresight, Harry, this stage is lost to us."

The woman's gaze fixed on Draco for a moment.

"Draco," Hilde said firmly, "I do not blame you for distrusting me, in fact I approve of it. There are those out there who would use you and Harry if they could. I do not believe there is any danger of that with the pair of you working together."

[She isn't lying,] Harry told his lover silently and Draco found his head filled with an image of Hilde as the Hecatemus was seeing her with his barriers partially down.

"From the way you are talking," Draco replied evenly, "you don't sound as if you think I will ever trust you."

"I doubt that you would under normal circumstances," Hilde replied openly.

That caused him to raise an eyebrow.

"But?" he asked at the unvoiced continuation.

The woman gave them both a slightly embarrassed but very determined smile.

"Now you find out why the hat put me in Hufflepuff," Draco heard her mutter to herself.

He was not sure what was coming, but he knew it was big in the general scheme of things.

"These days the procedure for choosing an instructor for a Hecatemae child is a matter of bureaucracy," Hilde appeared to be choosing her words carefully. "The head of the department chooses the best qualified from those who wish to be considered, baring any major objections from the family, that's it. Other members of the department support the trainer, but mostly the responsibility lies with the one chosen. It didn't always used to be like that. Before the Ministry, it was more of a family business: children apprenticed to their parents or their uncles to become familiar with the techniques for training a gifted child and when one was found a contest would be held to, I suppose, find the child's champion. There were no rules about who could enter the contest, and the trials were designed to find the best suited for the role. This could have meant that technically the final choice could be a complete stranger to everyone."

It had not occurred to Draco how Hecatemae were trained before the advent of the Ministry; he had been more interested in recent history, but it made sense.

"Hecatemae are far too valuable to risk," Hilde continued calmly, "and our ancestors were as aware of this as the Ministry is today. Hence there was a spell designed, an oath spell. The spell guarantees that the one swearing the oath cannot act, or in not acting, cause harm or endanger their charge."

The woman picked up a piece of parchment from the table beside her and passed it to Harry who immediately shared it with Draco.

"If you will allow it I am willing to be bound by this spell," Hilde said evenly.

Draco scanned the details of the oath spell that were in front of him and his eyes were drawn to one particular section.

"This is blood magic," he said pointedly and looked Hilde directly in the eye. "Blood magic is illegal."

"Mostly, yes," the woman replied with an openness about her features that Draco found a little disconcerting. "Spells of this type were often used to illegally bind those who did not wish to be bound, so the Ministry outlawed them; however, this is an exceptional case. This spell was never excluded from use because of its specific nature and possible application."

[Truth,] Harry backed up the conclusion Draco had already come to.

"This would bind you to Harry?" the Slytherin wanted to make sure he had the facts straight.

"And through him, you," Hilde replied calmly.

There was disquiet running through Harry and Draco could not blame his lover, after all it wasn't every day someone came up to you and offered to swear their life to you using an ancient spell.

"This says the oath last until your death," Harry said slowly. "What happens to you if I die first?"

It did not surprise Draco that Harry was more worried about the effects of the spell on Hilde than on himself.

"The oath becomes void," Hilde explained without the slightest hesitation.

Draco read the words and the instructions for the spell another time, leaving Harry to whatever was going through his head. The onus of the spell was completely on the oath taken and was cast by a third party: Draco could find nothing wrong with it at all.

"I don't like it," Harry said, interrupting his soul mate's thoughts. "It seems almost barbaric."

Hilde leant forward in her chair and smiled sympathetically.

"Harry," she said calmly, "to help you I must have your trust. Some of the things I will teach you require you to trust me almost as much as you trust Draco. To tell you the truth, I would prefer to take this oath; that way I cannot be made to betray you no matter what. It will protect me as much as it protects you. If you agree I will register the oath with the Ministry once it is done and no one will attempt to use me against you."

Draco's mind pointed out that if this was the case why hadn't Hilde produced this solution to begin with, but he could see where she was coming from.

"If you are so enthusiastic about this why didn't you tell us straight away?" Harry, it seemed, had come to the same conclusion.

Hilde blushed.

"Well, it's," for the first time she sounded unsure, "oh Merlin, I sometimes faint at the sight of blood."

For just a second Draco processed what she had said and then he couldn't help himself; he laughed. It was absurd.

"Your only objection to the spell is that you might faint?" he found this hilarious, now he knew exactly why Hilde was a Hufflepuff.

Draco sobered quickly and shook his head a little disbelievingly. Harry for his part was a well of uncertainty and trepidation and Draco knew he had to help.

[Hilde wants this,] Draco said evenly, [let her have it.]

[But it's like Imperio,] Harry voiced his objection silently.

[No,] the Slytherin replied firmly, [the spell will not make her do anything. What it will do is prevent her from telling anyone anything that will cause you harm, or from plotting against you.]

[But she said 'or by inaction' as well,] Harry pointed out. [Does that mean if we were together and someone threw a hex at me she'd feel compelled to jump in front of me or something like that?]

Draco had to admit he hadn't considered it from that angle.

"Hilde," he asked calmly, "Harry has a good point. Would the oath encourage you to sacrifice yourself if Harry was in danger?"

"No more than my normal instincts would," the woman replied firmly. "The spell will not change the way I think, it will just make sure that in acting the way I normally do I cannot wilfully break your trust."

Draco looked at Harry and the couple shared a moment of contemplative silence.

[I say yes,] he said eventually. [Hilde could be very helpful to us, and the sooner we can interact with the world normally the better. She can help us do that.]

Harry did not reply in words and he remained still for a few more moments, but eventually he nodded.

"If this is what you want," Harry said a little reluctantly.

"Another reason the Ministry did not ban this spell," Hilde said with a slight smile, "the blood must be willingly given. This cannot work with an unwilling participant."

Draco would have contested that point; there were ways and means to find your way around that particular clause, but he kept that to himself since it would not add anything to the situation.

"How would we do this?" Harry asked after a few more moments thought.

"Well there need to be two witnesses," Hilde said slowly, "or you can have as many as you like, and I would suggest Draco be the arbitrator. Knowing how careful," Draco heard paranoid, "you two appear to be, I would also suggest that you research the spell to your own satisfaction. Once you are ready the oath will only take a few minutes."

Harry looked at Draco and then back at Hilde before giving a very firm nod of his head.

"Okay," he agreed which brought a huge smile to Hilde's face.

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It took two days and a lot of book work on Draco and Hermione's parts before the Slytherin would give his unconditional consent to the spell. The couple told the headmaster and their house heads, all of whom seemed to think it was a splendid idea and it was agreed that the witnesses would be the three members of staff, Ron and Hermione. After everything was settled it did not take more than a few hours to arrange the whole thing.

Having Snape in the room bothered Harry somewhat as he waited with Draco for everyone to arrive. They were using the transfiguration classroom since it had plenty of protection on it to stop anyone knowing what was going on inside and Professor McGonagall had been there when the soul mates arrived, but

unfortunately Snape had been the second member of staff to turn up. The potions professor seemed to carry the cold of the dungeons with him wherever he went and the glare he sent at Harry every now and then did not help matters.

[Ignore him,] Draco said calmly Harry glanced at the head of Slytherin for the tenth time, [he's just annoyed that we chose this classroom and not his. With Snape you just have to know what mood he's in before you talk to him.]

[Well that's easy,] Harry replied and tried to follow the advice, [with me he's always in a bad mood.]

Draco smirked at him for his trouble and stroked the back of his hand fondly.

[Relax,] his soul mate told him confidently, [all you have to do is stand there and give up a little blood, I'm the one who has to get the spell right.]

[You'll be perfect as always,] Harry replied without thinking, for which he was rewarded with a private smile.

Just then the door opened, interrupting their conversation, and Ron and Hermione walked through followed by Dumbledore and Hilde. The two Gryffindors immediately made their way across to Harry and Draco as the headmaster introduced his guest to the other professors in the room.

"All right, Harry, Malfoy," Ron greeted with a grin. "Ready for the show?"

"This has not been arranged for your entertainment, Weasley," Draco replied in a very scathing tone.

The redhead was obviously quite excited by the whole proceedings because he refused to be put off by the comment or rise to the bait; Harry was actually quite impressed. However, there was no chance for Draco to try another tack to start a barrage of insults with Ron because Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat and gained everyone's attention.

"Welcome, Ladies and Gentlemen," the headmaster greeted in his usual cheerful manner, "I see that we are all here. As much as I would enjoy a small social gathering I suggest we should proceed. As you all know there is only so long a congregation of this kind may be kept secret in an establishment like Hogwarts, and the sooner we complete our task the less likely we are to be descended upon by curious pupils."

No one chose to disagree with that statement.

"Good luck," Hermione said to both the soul mates and then moved off to take her position in the room with Ron in tow.

Since the head girl had been one of those to work out how to perform the ceremony she knew exactly where she was supposed to be and was going to make sure her boyfriend was in the right place as well.

At a little prod from Draco, Harry moved to his designated spot and stood on the opposite side of the table to where Hilde was already standing and Draco took up his position at the end. There was a small clay bowl in the centre of the table with a combination of dried moss and sage sprinkled over the bottom of it. The ingredients for the spell had been provided by Snape, which seemed to have appeased the man a little about the choice of location, but not by much.

This was an enchantment of very few words and all parties knew their role in the event. When Draco looked at him Harry held out his hand without hesitation and before he could so much as feel nervous about what was to happen, Draco had reached out and stuck his finger with a silver pin. Picking up his wand and whispering a single word Draco caused blood to flow from the tiny wound in far more quantity than normal and it dripped quickly into the bowl.

"Witness the blood of the Liege Lord," the Slytherin said formally.

The words of the spell were archaic and Harry had a problem with being called a 'Liege Lord', but Draco had pointed out that changing the spell could bring about unforeseen consequences and it was best to play it safe. The spell had been written for use with female children and yet it still used the word 'Lord' which seemed to indicate that the creator had had a very good reason for using it.

"We witness," the five spectators spoke clearly with one voice.

At another whispered word the wound stopped weeping and Harry withdrew his hand feeling acutely that the level of magic in the room had gone up sharply. Draco's focus on his task was absolute and it felt strange to be excluded from it. Normally when the Slytherin performed magic Harry, although not a force in the charm or jinx, was still privy to the process, but with the oath spell he was a subject of the enchantment and hence not open to the casting.

He watched intently as his lover looked at Hilde and the woman stretched out her hand in an identical gesture to that which Harry had made. Draco stabbed her finger with the same pin and whispered the same charm to increase the flow of blood. It was quite fascinating to watch the red liquid drip onto the moss and sage and be soaked in by the very dry material just as his own blood had been. Dumbledore stepped up behind Hilde and placed his hands on her shoulders as the poor woman swayed, but she needed his support for only a few moments before she blinked back the reaction and the headmaster moved back into his original place.

"Witness the blood of the Vassal," Draco spoke slowly and clearly.

Harry had even more problem with Hilde being called a 'Vassal', but Hermione had agreed with his objection and still pointed out that it was just old wording, not anything to worry about.

"We witness," came the response.

"Blood of the Lord, blood of the Vassal freely given," Draco intoned, his wand raised over the bowl, "bound together now and until death."

Then the Slytherin spoke the Latin words of the spell and flicked his wand sending a shower of sparks towards the bowl. The contents of the vessel burst into a pure blue flame and Harry felt something pull at his magic. For a fraction of a second his awareness expanded and surrounded Hilde, who was looking back at him across the table. For just a moment all he could see was the petite woman and it was as if she could hide nothing from him. Harry's magic flashed around her and through her and left nothing untouched, accepting Hilde and her offer of loyalty.

The awareness of the woman lasted only a moment and then it was gone, but Harry could still feel a very faint connection and he knew without a doubt that the spell had worked. The whole thing left Harry feeling a little dazed and he glanced

down at the flaming bowl in a rather absent fascination. Once the fire went out, there was nothing left behind, not even a sooty residue; it was as if the bowl had never contained anything.

"It is done," Draco said calmly and slipped his wand back into his sleeve.

Hilde smiled at Harry brightly; a little too brightly as far as he was concerned. Then the woman opened her mouth to say something, but never managed it as she turned a deathly shade of grey and promptly fainted. If he had been thinking completely clearly Harry might have rushed to help, as if was he just stood there rather stupidly and peered over the table.

"Oops," was the most sensible thing he could think of to say.

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It had taken a good half hour for Harry to gather his wits completely after the ceremony, during which time Snape had taken great pleasure in being sarcastic about the whole situation. Hilde had taken only a few minutes to recover from her fainting spell and had been acutely embarrassed by her behaviour; Snape hadn't helped there either. In a bid to escape the potions master's humour, Draco had orchestrated the disbanding of the gathering as fast as possible and had then taken Harry back to their room. Most of the proceedings from the moment the spell had been completed until they were safely in their domain was somewhat vague in Harry's mind as he lay on the bed going over the whole thing.

"So Hilde will be coming to school every Monday evening," Harry needed a few points clarifying, "having a lesson with us and then going back to London on Tuesday morning?"

"That's what we agreed," Draco replied with an indulgent smile.

"And she'll be registering the oath bond with the Ministry tomorrow as soon as she goes back," he continued while re-cataloguing the jumbled thoughts in his head.

"First thing," his lover confirmed before going back to reading his latest retrieval from the library.

Harry stared at the ceiling for a while just letting his mind wander until his thoughts finally fixed on one idea. What was done was done; there was no way to break the oath spell except by the death of one of the participants, but he couldn't help wondering about the consequences.

"I know Hilde can't betray us now," he voiced what he was thinking, "and she can't be used against us for information, but do you think it will really save her if Voldemort notices she exists?"

Draco looked up from the book on the desk and turned in his chair.

"I don't know," his soul mate admitted honestly, "but at least it makes her less useful to him."

"But connects her to me far more directly, making her a target like all my other friends," Harry pointed out.

Draco shrugged and appeared thoughtful.

"Maybe," he replied eventually, "but it was her choice, Love. Always remember that all of us chose to be with you in whatever way we are here. You didn't force any of us; you didn't have to."

Harry didn't know what to say to that and after a few moments Draco went back to his reading. Sometimes The Boy Who Lived wondered what it would be like just to be someone else.

Chapter 20 From the Big Wide World

Harry thought he might die; the rate his heart was hammering and thumping in his ears made him absolutely positive that any second he would just keel over, and, given the circumstances, the sooner he did it the better. Holding a press conference had to be the worst idea he and Draco had ever come up with and he really wished he could run away and hide.

He and Draco were waiting outside the old charms classroom which had been co-opted for the whole event. Professor McGonagall had been remarkably efficient in organising everything after the couple had made the request and she was ruling the reporters with an iron fist. There were rumours that one reporter had tried to sneak away from the group and into the main school, and if what was told was true, the man had found out exactly what it felt like to be a small poodle.

At least they didn't have to contend with photographers, well none other than Creevey who was now part of the publicity team. Draco had negotiated the deal with the aspiring photographer and Colin was allowed to take photographs whenever the pair were in public situations and sell them to whom he liked, within reason. They had agreed on a deal where Draco and Harry received ten percent of the proceeds and Creevey had jumped at the chance. Harry was not really comfortable with having his picture splashed everywhere, but it meant there wouldn't be any other photographers sneaking around, and he had made very sure Colin knew he would be hexed into oblivion if any pictures the pair didn't like appeared in any publications.

[I think I'd rather walk into the Great Hall naked than go into that room,] Harry said silently as he tried not to fret.

Draco looked at him with one eyebrow raised and slowly a smile crept onto his soul mate's face; it was not an innocent expression. Harry didn't have to read his lover's mind to know what he was thinking.

[That was not supposed to give you nice mental images,] he complained with an exasperated sigh.

[I make no apologies for where mentioning you and 'naked' in the same sentence sends my thoughts,] Draco responded without the slightest indication of remorse. [And stop fretting, with the tag team McGonagall and I have worked out those reporters won't dare step out of line.]

That was another thing that had amazed Harry: quite how well his soul mate now appeared to be interacting with the head of Gryffindor. Professor McGonagall and Draco had had a little chat after he and Harry had requested her assistance while Harry had been engaged elsewhere and whatever they had said to each other had cleared up six years of dislike.

[You know it's scary quite how well you get on with my head of house these days,] Harry commented to his lover. [What exactly did you do, and please don't say 'Imperio'?]

Well it was one way to distract himself from the press conference and Draco laughed.

[Malfoy charm,] his soul mate replied with a smirk.

Harry snorted and decided that he'd pursue that line of questioning later; Professor McGonagall had just appeared at the door. They did not speak; they did not need to and the woman led the way into the other room. The reporters were all sat on chairs down the centre of the class room and what would have been the Professor's desk at the far end was set up with two chairs for the bonded pair.

Harry felt very uncomfortable as every eye in the room fixed on him and Draco, and his lover did not feel completely at ease, but to look at him no one would ever have known the Slytherin was not perfectly calm. The first thing Draco did was nod politely at Professor McGonagall as she took a position to one side, waited for Harry to sit down and then took the other chair. As Harry watched nervously his lover then proceeded to take out his wand and summoned two glasses of water.

The effect of a Malfoy with a weapon in his hand was not lost on Harry, as he quickly let his eyes run over the assembled reporters. Draco holding his wand seemed to fascinate the gathered members of the press. Draco met his gaze once as he passed him one of the glasses and Harry could see the mischief shining in his soul mate's grey eyes. Arranging himself comfortably on his chair beside Harry, Draco then sat back and gave the reporters the most angelic smile Harry had ever seen on his lover's face -- all the time failing to put away his wand.

Harry almost grinned as he watched Draco's aristocratic fingers play with the length of wood in an almost absent, nervous fashion. It was so beautifully done that for anyone not in the Slytherin's head it would have been impossible to tell if the action was a deliberate ploy to intimidate, or a forgotten habit.

[I'm so glad we're on the same side,] Harry told his soul mate.

[Best bit's about to come,] Draco replied without giving the slightest outward indication that he was not focusing his full attention on the members of the press.

"Comfortable, Gentlemen?" Professor McGonagall asked in a business like tone.

"Yes thank you, Professor," Draco replied politely in a beautiful display of aristocratic manners, "I think we're ready to begin."

Harry nodded his own approval with a smile; he didn't quite trust his voice not to give something away.

"Good," the head of Gryffindor responded and graced them with a very motherly expression.

Then the woman waved her wand and the walls lit up for a moment, sending a murmur of surprise around the gathered reporters.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the professor said and swept the gaze she usually reserved for the first years before their sorting, around the room, "I expect you all to behave with decorum. The spell in place on this room will nullify any of those ridiculously charmed automatic quills which choose to bend, misquote or in any other way 'improve' the truth for your readers. If you wish to use such a device make sure it is set to record the proceedings as they actually occur. Any infraction of the rules of which you were made aware before you arrived will result in your removal from this room. This is the only warning you will receive."

And with that she swept into the corner of the room in a manner that would have made Snape jealous. Draco had been right; the best bit had been to come.

"Harry," a familiar voice drew his attention and his eyes were drawn to none other than Rita Skeeta.

The woman was as atrociously dressed as usual and had affected a smile that would have looked false glued in place on a wax figure let alone a human being. Harry swallowed nervously once and tried to keep his true feelings off of his face. The blackmail material he and his friends had on the woman almost guaranteed she would not write any more nasty articles, but that still didn't make her a good journalist and Harry could barely stomach the woman.

[Just picture them writhing under Crutiatius at your feet,] Draco's sage advice filtered into his mind.

[Draco,] Harry replied after considering this for a moment, [most people would probably suggest picturing them naked.]

[Eeew,] was the almost instant response, [why in Merlin's name would you want to do that. Oh, now I have to scrub my brain out with cauldron scourer.]

Harry just about managed to stop from smiling.

[Love,] he said silently, [you're quite scary, and yes I know: of course you're scary, you're a Malfoy.]

Harry was sure that would have warranted a response, but Rita had taken his look as permission to continue.

"Would you mind sharing with us how you realised Draco was your soul mate?" the use of his first name obviously rankled the Slytherin because Harry felt a shot of annoyance go through his lover, but Harry was used to it.

The whole world seemed to think they knew Harry Potter, and complete strangers using his first name like they had known him for years had accosted him since he was eleven. It was not really the question he had expected first, but at least it wasn't too embarrassing.

"Um," Harry was so proud of his eloquent response. "I don't think I've ever quite thought of it like that. We became friends, and then, well we moved on to being boyfriends and, um, then things just sort of happened."

"So your relationship evolved like any other normal relationship?" the reporter asked in what Harry suspected she thought was a sympathetic tone.

That question rather stumped him since he hadn't had that many relationships and they most definitely had not been anything like what he had with Draco.

"Harry offered his friendship," Draco's smooth tones caused Rita's gaze to flick away from Harry, "no strings attached. What progressed from there was something neither of us expected, but both of us welcomed. What we have is not normal, but it is both beautiful and makes us whole. I never could, nor ever would, want to give it up."

Harry couldn't help himself, he beamed at his soul mate's words letting the warmth they caused in him flow between them. When he looked back at the reporters there were several slightly awed expressions and for a moment he wondered just what the pair of them looked like.

"Mary Notarius, Teen Witch Special," a small rotund woman with a face that had seen many smiles, introduced herself as the moment broke. "If you don't mind me asking, my readers would very much like to know when you first realised you were in love?"

Some of the other reporters did not look impressed with the question, but Harry had no problem with that one.

"25th September, 10:24 pm," he said firmly and with absolute certainty.

Draco looked at him and to anyone else the look would have conveyed casual interest, to Harry it screamed surprise. From the murmur that went round the room, those gathered to ask the questions hadn't expected quite such a specific answer either.

[You know the time?] Draco voiced his question.

Rather than just reply Harry sent his lover a small flash of exactly what he remembered from the evening. He had etched every detail onto his memory and he shared his recollection of their first real touch.

"If it's not too personal," the kindly looking witch continued her enquiry, "how did you know?"

Harry couldn't help himself; he smiled again and blushed.

"Um, well as the Muggle song says," he said, warming to the subject, "it's in his kiss."

That drew a pleasant laugh from the assembled press and an almost love sick sigh from Mary Notarius. Harry did not think the woman knew what objective meant.

"Draco," one of the other reporters took the opportunity to interrupt and Harry felt his soul mate prickle once more at the use of his name, "Robert Scriptum, Daily Prophet, sources say you were quite the ladies man, did your attraction to Harry surprise you?"

Draco laughed at the question, but his wand twitched in his hand, Harry was impressed how much colour Scriptum lost in his face as the simple movement.

"Who have you been listening to?" the Slytherin asked in a tone that managed to be perfectly reasonable and utterly insulting at the same time. "My tastes have never been exclusive. I can't say my attraction to Harry was a surprise; you all have to admit he is very pleasing on the eye," that caused a small murmur of amusement at Draco's tone, to run round the room. "What surprised me more was our friendship which allowed the attraction to play out. It is no secret that we have been enemies for years."

"Why did you become friends?" Scriptum, it seemed, liked to live dangerously.

The question caused the first feeling of disquiet in Draco and Harry did not like that. He knew his lover was very uncomfortable with the whole topic of his change to the side of light and if they were not careful that was exactly where the interview was going. Draco was shielding Harry from the awkward questions and he decided to return the favour.

Harry's hand was sitting next to his glass of water on the table and quite deliberately he pushed a little magic at the liquid. There was just a hint of light in the water as the power entered it and it bubbled for a second.

"Draco defected," Harry said shortly in a tone that begged no argument and every pair of eyes in the room except his and Draco's flicked to the glass and then away again.

There was an air of expectant fear in the room as if everyone was holding their breath and only let it go when Harry broke the moment by looking over to his lover as if he was totally unaware of what he had just done. What the reporters had been expecting he could only guess at, but it seemed to be a lot worse than anything Harry could think up, which pleased him no end. He'd never considered using his power to coerce an audience before, but it seemed to be working nicely.

[You learn fast,] Draco commented with admiration in his tone.

[I have a very good teacher,] Harry replied and waited patiently for the next question.

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"Thank you for coming," Draco said politely after he held up his hand for silence, "but I'm afraid we must call these proceeding to a halt. We look forward to reading your articles."

Not a soul chose to argue and there were even a couple of reporters who smiled and returned the thanks. The whole event had been a masterful display of manipulation through abject terror: in Draco's case because of his Death Eater reputation; and in Harry's because the whole room was convinced they might receive a display of Hecatemus power first hand if they pushed him too far and he lost control. By now the couple had the reporters so well trained that they were silencing each other if it became obvious that the questions were causing a detrimental reaction. Harry felt slightly guilty for the whole pantomime, but part of him was incredibly proud of his and Draco's achievement. From the look on her face, Professor McGonagall seemed to approve completely as well.

[Well that was not quite what I expected,] Harry said honestly as he and Draco left the room hand in hand.

He was feeling much more comfortable about the whole situation now.

[It's a matter of control,] Draco replied fondly. [Now we have it and there's not a damn thing any of them can do about it.]

Harry grinned.

[Your comment about looking forward to reading their articles caused some of them to go whiter than Sir Nicholas,] he commented lightly.

[Genius runs in the family,] Draco replied smoothly, [and some of us actually choose to use it.]

As the door closed, Harry pulled his soul mate to him and leant in for what he considered was a well deserved kiss. Draco melted to him instantly and both of them managed to forget where they were. A flash bulb going off brought them

both back with a start. Harry looked up to see Colin Creevey grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"Public place," the photographer pointed out cheerfully.

For a moment there was complete silence and then Draco calmly looked at Harry.

"Do you want to hex him or shall I?" his lover asked in a very reasonable tone.

Harry looked at Colin squarely as if considering the question carefully and he watched the smile on his housemate's face slowly morph in a very unsure expression.

"I'll be back at the tower," the photographer said somewhat hesitantly and then before Harry or Draco could reply the sixth year turned and fled.

As the younger boy disappeared around the corner Harry couldn't help himself; he burst out laughing. The look on Creevey's face had been priceless.

[This is too much fun,] Harry said with a broad grin.

[Now you begin to see why Gryffindor's are my favourite hobby,] Draco replied in kind.

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Meditating in their room with Draco in attendance was one thing; meditating in their room on his own was another; but neither provided any distractions for Harry. After a couple of weeks of practicing with the Prisma he knew he needed more of a challenge if he was going to continue to improve. Hence one Sunday morning towards the end of November he found himself with the small meditation device in his hand looking at the bedroom door.

Draco was sitting at their desk calmly finishing his Arithmancy homework and appeared to be ignoring his lover and Harry didn't want to disturb him. However, he was also not one hundred percent sure that taking the Prisma into the common room would be a good idea either. On the one hand it would give him more disturbances to deal with which would improve his concentration, on the other it was bound to attract attention and Harry was not fond of that.

"It's a good idea," Draco said without even looking up.

"It'll cause a hundred and one questions," Harry replied, not remotely surprised that his soul mate knew exactly what he was thinking even though he knew he hadn't been broadcasting.

Sometimes Draco did not need a telepathic connection to read Harry like a book; in fact he barely needed to look at him most of the time to know exactly what was going through Harry's head. His knack of reading Harry's mind without actually reading Harry's mind would have been disturbing if it hadn't been for the fact that Harry chose not to attempt to hide anything anyway.

"Then tell them to go away you're busy," Draco told him calmly and finally turned from where he was writing. "Like I said it's a good idea. You need to expand your practices."

Harry still wasn't sure; it could be more trouble than it was worth. He definitely didn't want to freak out his housemates by invading the common room with strangeness, and what if something went wrong.

"Harry," Draco said with his trademark smirk firmly in place, "what is our motto at times like this?"

Harry couldn't help the smile that graced his lips.

"Draco knows best, always listen to Draco," Harry said with a laugh and looked at the Prisma in his hands.

He could feel his lover's eyes still on him.

"Okay," he said with a shake of his head, "I'm going."

"Good," Draco responded and threw his hands up in the air in mock exasperation, "I'm busy here. Bloody Gryffindors, always getting in the way of genius."

Harry headed for the door with a laugh.

[Call if you need me,] Draco's mental contact caught him before he was properly into the stairwell and caused him to smile fondly.

[Thanks,] he returned and let his lover's warm mental presence envelope him, [I will.]

A couple of people looked up as Harry came down the stairs, but quickly returned to whatever they had been doing. He may have been a phenomenon anywhere else, but in the Gryffindor common room he was just another seventh year most of the time. Harry hoped that he wasn't about to change that by what he was going to do.

There was a spare chair beside the fire and he claimed it quickly and pulled the small table in front of it towards him. He then set the box containing the Prisma on the smooth surface and opened it carefully. The crystal sat on its bed of red satin waiting for him to activate it and Harry was strangely reluctant to do so.

He could call it into life unerringly now, but it was not fear of failure which caused him to hesitate. The Prisma would undoubtedly attract attention and Harry was unsure that doing so would be a good idea.

[Just get on with it,] Draco's voice sounded with an amused tone in his mind.

[Yes, Professor, right away, Professor,] Harry replied, but did reach out his hands to either side of the crystal.

[If you wanted to role play all you had to do was ask,] his lover's words slipped into his mind with a rather explicit mental image involving himself, Draco and the high table in the Great Hall.

Harry took his hands away from the Prisma as all concentration fled.

[Do you want me to practice this or do you want me to come up there and shag you senseless?] he asked his soul mate pointedly.

There was amusement coming from Draco's end of the bond.

[Half an hour's practice,] the Slytherin said in a very mischievous tone, [and then, if I'm satisfied with your progress I might reward you.]

[We're back to the positive reinforcement are we?] Harry enquired dryly.

[If it works, it works,] Draco replied with a mental laugh. [Now don't disappoint me, Lover, I have plans for you.]

It took Harry a few minutes to gather his scattered thoughts as several possibilities about his lover's plans tried to grab his attention, but eventually he managed to find his calm centre. Placing his hands either side of the crystal once more, he focused his thoughts and reduced the mental babble in his mind to a low hum at the back of his brain. It was being able to push the concentration on his shields and processing the world into an almost subconscious part of his mind so he could move the Prisma freely that was the benefit of the device. Splitting his mind into various functions was a skill that was not only useful to Harry these days; it was a necessity.

As the majority of his world focused down to the crystal between his hands, it leapt into life as a rainbow of colour began at its centre, and it lifted to six inches off its base. The lights erupted from the device as it started to twist and spin on its axis and Harry let his mind absorb the input.

Time meant very little when he was using the Prisma, although he had managed to figure out how to set an alarm call in his head to bring him out of the trance like state. Harry felt vague intrusions on his concentration as he allowed the colours to flow into his thoughts, but he catalogued them as unimportant and filed them for inspection later, maintaining his concentration on his meditation. When in this state he did not exactly lose time, when he returned to the real world he would have an unbroken chain of memory, but time did not really matter.

When Harry finally withdrew his consciousness back from the single focus, he blinked and watched the crystal sink back onto its satin bed before he realised that he was no longer sitting alone. He glanced around and met the eyes of five of his housemates: one first year; two fourth years; one fifth year and Seamus.

"I have never seen a kaleidoscope do that, Harry," the Irish Gryffindor said cheerfully totally unfazed at being caught watching.

"That's because it's not a kaleidoscope," Harry replied and decided to not be hideously embarrassed. "It's a Prisma."

"Never heard of one of those," the fifth year, who's name escaped Harry, admitted with interest.

The somewhat caustic voice at the back of Harry's mind that had emerged ever since he started to go out with Draco informed him that this fact was not surprising, but the Gryffindor shushed it firmly.

"It reacts to mental focus," Harry explained patiently. "You concentrate on it and it moves."

"So you were making it do all that?" the first year was obviously the brave type.

Harry nodded and went to close the device, but stopped short.

"Would you like a try?" he asked the fascinated looking girl.

"Cool," was the instant response.

Harry moved out of his seat and indicated that the first year should sit down, which she did. Now that she was the centre of the attention of the group she did not appear quite as comfortable, but she was definitely not a shrinking violet.

"Okay, put your hands either side of the crystal like I was doing," Harry instructed in a friendly manner. "You have to focus on nothing but the stone, focus your mind and your magic on it. Now don't be disheartened if it doesn't do a lot, it's mainly designed for my sort of mind and that's a very bizarre place. If it moves at all I will be very impressed."

The youngster appeared a bit perturbed by that confession, but reached out to the Prisma anyway. A look of complete concentration appeared on the girl's face as she stared at the crystal, but for a while nothing happened. She shifted in the seat and frowned under Harry's watchful gaze and then the Prisma responded for the first time. The smallest pink glow started at the centre of the crystal and it twitched, almost standing it on its end before it fell back to the satin bed. The first year huffed in a very frustrated manner.

"Hey, that was good," Harry said before the girl could become too disappointed, "I only made it move the first time I tried it because Draco helped."

The girl appeared to perk up a little at the praise, but she did not appear very pleased with herself.

"Hey, Harry," Seamus said cheerfully, "can I have a go?"

What the Hecatemus really wanted to do was pack up and head upstairs to see if Draco was impressed with his practice session, but Harry knew he had started this and he was too polite just to disappear.

"Ah, okay," he told his ex-dorm mate, "but you'll need to use the chair, if you're distracted by the way you're sitting it will never work."

The first year swapped with the Irishman and Seamus began his attempt to reproduce the effect Harry had created. It was little better than the girl's try had been, but after years of trying to turn water into rum Seamus had developed an incredible ability to focus on one thing, even if it was futile and he managed to make the crystal float although it refused to spin. After that everyone wanted a try and Harry found himself the centre of the latest craze to hit the common room.

It had to have been a good forty five minutes later that Draco moved through the crowd which had formed around the new game and into the personal space that existed around Harry.

"Do excuse me," his lover said in a tone which just begged someone to challenge him, "I need to borrow Harry."

Harry found himself grabbed under the arm and hauled to his feet and discovered to his delight that Draco was virtually humming with frustration. Usually it was Harry who had to hang on to his self control, but it appeared that he had been so distracted that he had not even noticed quite how aroused his lover had become.

"You can keep the Prisma for now, but if it gets lost or damaged I will take a piece out of all of you," Draco was obviously in a hurry and not taking no for an answer.

And with that ultimatum Harry found himself virtually dragged across the room and up the stairs. On the outside Draco appeared focussed and intent upon something, but his lover was willing to bet he was the only one who knew what Draco was concentrating on.

[Did you want me for something, Draco?] he asked innocently as he was thrust through the door to their room.

[You were supposed to be up here nearly an hour ago,] his soul mate replied pointedly. [I do not appreciate being kept waiting.]

Harry couldn't quite keep the grin off his face.

"Oh just get naked you bloody Gryffindor," Draco said exasperatedly.

That caused Harry to laugh, but that did not stop him reaching for the bottom of his jumper and pulling it over his head along with the T-shirt he was wearing underneath. The moment there was bare flesh Draco pounced; in a very sophisticated way of course, but a pounce it was none the less, and Harry was quite happy to give his lover the complete single-mindedness which had so recently been directed at the Prisma.

Chapter 21 "I always knew there were people who didn't like me"

Professor McGonagall didn't want him to go, but had stopped short of forbidding him; Ron and Hermione were both nervous about him going anywhere out of school grounds and Draco was silently anxious about the whole idea, but wanted to go as much as he did. Hence, as everyone else in the third year and above prepared for the last trip to Hogsmeade before Christmas, so did Harry.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Ron asked for the third time as Harry riffled around in his trunk looking for his money pouch.

Ron was sat on the bed, Hermione was hovering next to him and Draco was leaning against the wall looking pensive. The overriding emotion in the room was anxiety and Harry was trying to ignore it. He would be lying if he told them that the idea of leaving Hogwarts did not make him a little jumpy, but it was the same as leaving the hospital wing had been: something he had to do sooner or later. At least this time no one was trying to pretend anything and he and Draco would undoubtedly stick together like glue.

"We're going," Harry said evenly, "I have Christmas shopping to do and I'm not doing it by owl."

"But what if..." Ron began but Harry stopped him with a look.

"If I lived my life by what ifs I'd never get out of bed in the morning," he said calmly.

He looked over to Draco for a little support and his lover raised an eyebrow at him. Draco didn't exactly disapprove of the whole trip but this was obviously Harry's fight.

"A lifetime's learning in just over two months," Hermione said slowly, "Harry, you exceeded my expectations."

Harry sighed and pulled his money pouch out from where he had just spotted it. Hermione was obviously learning bad habits from Draco, or possibly she had been that way all the time and Harry's soul mate was just bringing it out more by being there.

"I'm not trying to prove anything," Harry said honestly, "I just want to go. If anything odd happens we'll come back, I promise."

Both Hermione and Ron looked at him in a very appraising manner: Harry accepted their scrutiny in good spirits.

"I haven't had a breakdown in three weeks," he pointed out hopefully.

He really wanted to go on this trip, but he did not want to upset his friends: they had been there for him ever since his "change" and they were rather high on his list of priorities these days.

"You're impossible," Hermione said pointedly and Harry grinned; he knew he'd won.

"If you go mental in Zonko's I am not bailing you out," Ron said with a half smile.

So that was it: they went shopping.

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Harry might have been seventeen and he might have been a Hecatemus, but neither of these facts had reduced his fondness for sweets. In fact his increased need for high-energy food was rather encouraging the habit. Draco, whose sweet tooth was legendary in the school, did not object either when Harry dragged them into the sweet shop towards the end of their shopping spree. There was only one problem: a large number of the rest of the school had decided to do the same thing. They had already been to visit Ron's brothers in Zonko's; wandered around several other shops; and had lunch in a bid to avoid the rush, but it seemed that a large number of the rest of the pupils from Hogwarts had put off their visit to the sweet shop as well.

Harry was having such a good time being out of Hogwarts that he found it amusing when Hermione, Ron and Draco formed up around him like a protective barrier. He would be the first to admit he was still not good in crowds, but the way his friends and his lover put themselves between Harry and the rest of the people in the shop made him smile.

[Could you have picked a place with more people?] Draco grumbled good-naturedly in his head.

[Well if you want we could start a rumour that there's a sale on sherbet lemons,] Harry replied lightly which caused his partner to laugh.

"It's not polite to leave your friends out of the conversation," Hermione said with mock hurt.

"He started it," Harry said with a laugh and earned a dirty look from Draco.

"Turn the knife in my back while you are at it, why don't you, Potter," his lover replied and reached behind him dramatically.

Harry slipped his arm round Draco's waist and pulled him close, giving him a peck on the cheek as he did so.

"Forgive me," he said in an equally dramatic tone.

"Buy me a jelly snake and I'm yours," Draco replied and batted his eyelids.

Harry laughed and Ron gave a snort of playful disgust.

"Never tell me what you're thinking," Ron said as he shook his head and rolled his eyes.

That made the whole group laugh and then they made their way across to the counter. Harry point blank refused to let the others pay for anything since he wanted to give them something in return for letting him come shopping. Even Ron, who was known to be a little touchy on the subject of money, gave in when Harry insisted and began choosing sweets diligently.

They had quite a haul by the time Harry decided they had enough. They had spent so long collecting things that Mr Honeyduke was serving other customers while the four found what they wanted. Hence they had to wait for him to finish with the others to pay, and it was as Harry reached over to pick up one more liquorice wand that someone pushed past from the gaggle near the till. Due to

the fact that he was leaning over past the neat ring the other three had round him, Harry found himself jostled and the wand fell back into the box from his nerveless fingers.

The hatred that ran though him was so pure and so consuming that it dimmed out everything around him. It cut straight to his heart and Harry lost all sense of reality for a few moments; he had no doubt that the emotion was aimed at him. When the world came swimming back into focus Harry found Draco's strong arms around him holding him on his feet. With his soul mate so close the episode had not caused his mental barriers to drop, but it was still very disorientating.

"What happened?" Hermione asked urgently as Harry shook his head to clear it.

"Someone doesn't like me," he replied, forcing his mind back into balance.

"I'd say it was a little stronger than that," Draco said, a touch of ice in his voice. "That group of Slytherins, did you see which one touched Harry?"

"I wasn't looking," Ron admitted guiltily.

"I didn't see either," Hermione agreed with an annoyed grimace. "Are you okay, Harry?"

"I'm fine," he responded immediately, not wanting to let the incident completely wreck the outing. "I always knew there were people who didn't like me, but I had no idea I inspired such hatred."

[You're not fine,] Draco said silently, but did not voice his fears aloud.

[I will be in a couple of minutes,] Harry promised faithfully, [just don't let go.]

Draco rolled his eyes at Harry in exasperation, but so that only he could see.

"Let's pay and get out of here," Harry said and tried to smooth over the whole thing, "I need some air."

He was pretty sure he'd gone three shades paler than normal, because Mr Honeyduke served them ridiculously quickly after that and the look the man sent them seemed to indicate that he thought Harry might pass out any moment. They left the shop quickly before anyone could make a fuss and then moved to a quiet side of the street to regroup.

Draco had shifted in to protective mode and his mental presence was a great help as Harry tried to rid himself of the nasty aftertaste of the negative emotion. His soul mate kept his arm round Harry like a shield and as requested did not let go. It took a few minutes, but slowly the world made it back into proportion. Harry had given up feeling like an idiot when these things happened: he just accepted them as a fact of life and got on with dealing with them.

"We can finish shopping now," he said with a grin as lucidity returned. "Sorry about that."

Then, before anyone could comment on that he went cold as he saw a streak of black out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head and saw the tail end of a large black dog disappear. It was like seeing a ghost as memories of his godfather crowded into his brain and he felt suddenly faint. For the second time in the day the only thing that kept Harry standing was Draco.

"Harry," Hermione said in a very worried voice.

"That's it, we're going back to the castle," Draco said very firmly.

Harry could barely put two thoughts together let alone two words and he did not protest. Draco's presence was reassuring in his brain, but his soul mate did not ask questions, seeming to realise that Harry was in no state to answer them just at the moment.

He remained in a kind of dazed shock all the way back to Hogwarts and only as the four settled in the warmth of the common room did life begin to return to his preoccupied mind.

[What happened?] Draco asked calmly as Harry gazed into the fire.

"I saw a black dog," he returned aloud so his friends could hear as well, "it looked just like Sirius. I think a second shock was too much for my system, I'm sorry."

"No need to apologise, Mate," Ron replied firmly, "that would have affected any of us."

Harry didn't think that was correct, but he gave his friend a half smile for trying. Draco just pulled him into his arms where he was sitting on the sofa next to him and rested Harry's head on his chest. Of all people, his soul mate was the one who knew quite how badly his godfather's death had affected Harry and he did not try and make platitudes, he just wrapped the Hecatemus in a warm blanket of love.

"I'll see if I can get the house elves to give us some mulled cider," Hermione decided in a very practical manner. "Everything always feels better when you're warm."

The memories were still floating around Harry's mind and for a change he let them. It was as if after a year of repressing them, now they had surfaced, they were stronger than ever. He felt a little sad that there were not more, but he did not try and force them away.

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It was five days before Christmas, and, as far as Draco was concerned, the school was nice and quiet. There not being pupils all over the place to fall over was a great improvement as far as he was concerned. He and Harry were the only two seventh years staying in Gryffindor over the holidays along with two first years, one third year, and one sixth year, which gave them a nice lot of space to enjoy.

"Apparating," Harry said as if the one word should explain everything that was on his mind.

Draco looked up from where he was completing his Arithmancy homework, hoping that more of an explanation would be provided. Sometimes Harry seemed to forget that although they were in constant contact they did not have the same brain.

"Hmm, conversations in single words, an experiment in communicating with Hufflepuffs?" he asked sarcastically.

Harry grinned at him cheerfully and put a form on top of Draco's almost completed calculations.

"You need to get your licence," his soul mate said happily.

"I've known how to Apparate since I was fifteen," Draco replied calmly. "Why do I need a licence the moment I hit seventeen, and, for that matter, I became an adult the moment I bonded with you, so what's the sudden rush? It's not as if we can use it here."

Harry looked a little crestfallen at that response and Draco felt a pang of guilt. It wasn't that the idea of being able to Apparate legally filled him with horror or anything; it was just the idea of having to go through the motions.

"Okay, don't look at me like that," he said after a few seconds, "I can't maintain my cool, calm, guiltless Malfoy exterior when you do the puppy dog thing. I do want my licence, but the idea of going anywhere near London with you just at the moment fills me with dread."

That put an understanding smile back on Harry's face and he gave Draco a quick peck on the cheek.

"Doesn't make me want to dance for joy either," his lover replied, "but I think it's covered. I've been talking to Dumbledore today: actually it was his idea that you get your licence as quickly as possible, and we've made arrangements."

Several overly complicated plans came to the Slytherin's mind at the revelation that the headmaster had come up with the whole idea, but Draco shoved them aside.

"This smells fishy," he said slowly, "we're not just going to London for a piece of paper are we?"

Harry appeared surprised, and then amused; Draco knew he had deduced the truth.

"Technically I don't need a license," he decided to inform his lover of his reasoning: Harry was not stupid, but he was also not devious enough for the Slytherin's tastes, and it was one of Draco's projects to educate his soul mate in this area for his own good. "You have one and so they can't prosecute you for Apparating without one so they can't prosecute me. Even the Ministry isn't that stupid. So there had to be another reason for going. I assume this has something to do with the Order."

There was no hesitation as Harry nodded and Draco marvelled once again at how easy it was to be completely honest with each other. Their bond made it impossible to lie, but it did not make it impossible to hold back, and the fact that neither of them ever tried was something he found incredible. Draco hoped he never stopped feeling the slight surprise.

"Dumbledore thinks it's time you were introduced to some of the Order and the headquarters personally," Harry explained calmly. "Getting your license is a good excuse to go to London and meet up with Lupin and Tonks."

"You are aware that a rendezvous with a werewolf and a Metamorphmagus should not be a settling prospect," Draco said lightly.

It drew the expected laugh from Harry and Draco let himself enjoy the amusement that ran through his lover.

"So you'll come then?" his soul mate asked cheerfully, which Draco found just so 'Harry'.

He was pretty sure he could force the term 'Harry' into wizarding language usage if he tried hard enough. There was something unique about the way his soul mate saw the world, a combination of respect, love and responsibility that no one in Draco's experience had ever used before. It was obvious to him that Dumbledore had set up a meeting of certain members of the Order so they could meet the traitorous golden child of Lucius Malfoy in person and yet Harry was still asking as if the whole trip was optional. What was even more amazing was that Draco was sure if he said 'no', his soul mate would trot back to the headmaster and tell him they weren't going.

"Yes, I'll come," he said, putting a resigned tone into his voice, "are we going tomorrow?"

"No way," Harry replied firmly, "I have other plans for your birthday. The Order don't get you 'til the day after."

"And do I get a say in these plans?" Draco asked, trying not to play up to the mischievous look in his lover's eyes, but unable to keep the slight smile off his face.

Being linked to Harry Potter was very bad for his ice-cold image, these days the only people in front of whom he seemed to be able to maintain it were the Slytherins. It occurred to Draco that maybe that said more about the Slytherins than it did about him.

"No," Harry said cheekily and planted a kiss right on his mouth.

When Harry broke away, Draco rolled his eyes just to keep up appearances and his lover laughed before he turned and headed back out of their room. The term might be over but Draco had plenty of homework to finish as did Harry, a fact which seemed to have escaped the Gryffindor. Draco was already fully prepared to give absolutely no sympathy when his soul mate tried to cram all his assignments into the last few days before term began again. It was technically true that Harry was taking the opportunity to practice with his Hecatemus abilities while most of the student population was away, but that was no excuse as far as Draco was concerned and his planned lack of understanding had nothing to do with revenge for the number of times his lover had distracted him, honestly.

Chapter 22 A Birthday

Draco woke up slowly as a warm body curled against him and wrapped him in a close embrace. The feeling of perfect safety was so pleasant that he let himself drift just below proper consciousness for a few minutes before he reluctantly opened his eyes. Harry kissed his neck lightly the moment Draco came to full wakefulness.

"Happy birthday," his soul mate greeted warmly and ran his hand over Draco's torso.

It was cold in the castle so they habitually slept in pyjamas, but Draco realised that Harry had already taken his off: his lover was naked.

"How long have you been waiting for me to wake up?" he asked with a laugh as Harry's hands slipped under his nightclothes.

"A little while," his lover admitted with a grin as Draco twisted in his arms so he could see Harry's face. "I'm afraid I unwrapped your first present, but it was that or go completely mad. It's bound to carry out your deepest desires, so all you have to do is say what you want."

Draco let his eyes wander over Harry's innocent expression and then down over the exposed piece of chest where the blankets had been pushed down. His lover really was a fine specimen of the human condition.

"What if I said I wanted breakfast?" Draco asked, matching Harry's innocent expression.

"Then from what's going on in your head I'd say you have a funny definition of breakfast," Harry replied with a completely straight face.

Draco grinned impishly and ran a finger down his lover's nose.

"You're right," he said cheerfully, "I think I want to play with my present first."

Before Harry could react Draco lifted the covers and dived underneath, pushing his soul mate flat onto the bed, half crawling on top of him and pinning him down. It was obviously not what the Hecatemus had expected, but Harry did not resist and relaxed back as Draco began to find his way in the dark under the blankets. Driving Harry to distraction was a game Draco enjoyed playing and he set about his task with relish.

Harry moaned in pleasure as Draco trailed little kisses down his collar bone and onto his chest. Draco The blond wizard could feel the flashes of delight that his ministrations caused in his soul mate and he brushed his lips over one nipple, flicking his tongue out as he did so. He liked Harry's body: it was strong and lean; muscled but not bulky and his lover had a sexiness about him that was all male. Harry reacted with another moan as Draco gently bit the spot he had just licked and he continued to play, moving lower and kissing, nipping and licking as he did so, trying to illicit as many more reactions as possible..

When Harry explored his body, Draco always felt as if his lover knew every inch already, as if he had a map of his whole being in Harry's head. Draco had no such map, but he did have Harry's reactions to guide him and, even after the months they had been together, he enjoyed finding new ways to excite his soul mate. The fact that through their rapport Draco experienced everything as well didn't

discourage him at all either.

Draco slowly worked his way down Harry's body, continually running his hands the full length of his soul mate's torso as he did so. The lower he moved the more vocal his lover became, especially when he gently rested a couple of fingers on one of Harry's pectoral muscles and traced little patterns as he used his mouth on the sensitive area below his partner's navel. Draco could feel the arousal coursing through his soul mate and he enjoyed the sensation running through his own body and the challenge of not allowing himself to react to it. He liked to let the pressure build inside himself until he could do nothing but explode: it was a game with himself as well as Harry.

As usual Draco was wearing his black silk pyjamas and he moved so the material brushed over the skin of his lover's thigh, next to and on which, he was mostly laying. He was rewarded by a sigh from his bed fellow. Draping himself over Harry further he slowly dragged himself back up along the length of his soul mate. He allowed one leg to slip between Harry's and rubbed himself against his lover's hip as he put gentle pressure on Harry's burgeoning erection with his thigh. The moan that came out of his lover was very gratifying.

The stimulation caused desire to pulse through both of them and Draco had to fight the urge to rub harder: he wanted this to last. Bringing himself under control he moved slowly, drawing moans and wordless mumbles of encouragement from Harry. It felt so good that he almost lost himself in the sensations that ran through himself and his soul mate, and eventually he had to become still and reign his need back in. Draco prided himself on control, but he knew with much more of what he was doing he would it. He moved out from under the covers again and came to rest nose to nose with Harry.

"Turn over," he whispered in his lover's ear as he rubbed himself against Harry one more time.

The Hecatemus felt very reluctant to break the contact, but as Draco smiled down at him and lifted himself away from him, Harry did as he was told. Draco lowered himself back down onto his soul mate, gently pushing one leg between his lover's knees. He moulded to Harry, allowing his own curves to fit to his lover and then he moved slowly up and down the length of him. Harry pushed his face into the pillow and groaned as Draco kept up the contact of silk on skin and kissed the back of his soul mate's neck.

Biting down on the Gryffindor's shoulder Draco caught a moan that threatened to fall from his own mouth: he was not about to give in to the raging passion in his body. Control had always been a Malfoy byword and Draco used it to curb his desire to just keep moving until he exploded. He had a plan and he was going to follow it.

[Spread your legs for me, Harry,] Draco whispered in his lover's mind as he quickly pulled away.

The bedside table was within easy reach and he dipped quickly into the draw for the small pot of lubricant they kept there. Placing it on the mattress he threw the bedclothes over the end of the bed to reveal a completely naked Harry spread-eagled on the bed before him. The chill in the room did nothing to cool the ardour in either of them and Draco moved back to his lover almost as if compelled to do so.

He moved down the bed, slipping between Harry's spread legs. Just for a moment

he allowed himself to run his eyes over his soul mate, taking in the beautiful curves of muscle and sinew arranged in perfect surrender. Harry would give him anything he asked and that meant more to Draco than he could ever explain. His erection throbbed hotly as he let his gaze run over the body before him and he felt the sensation echo through his lover. When he finally reached out to touch his soul mate the light contact of his fingers on Harry's buttocks caused the Gryffindor to whimper.

Draco ran his hands all over Harry's backside and down between his legs making his lover gasp into his pillow. Harry knew he was being played, Draco could feel it, and the Hecatemus was loving every second. Harry also apearred to know that he was moaning for both of them and he was not holding back.

As his finger tips danced gently over Harry's balls, Draco moved in with his mouth once more. He nipped at one buttock and tasted freshly washed skin. The fact that Harry must have been awake for quite some time and had carefully prepared himself for when his lover awoke did not escape Draco. How Harry had made it to the bathroom and back again without Draco realising he was gone was not something he was about to figure out now.

Kissing and nipping while running his fingers over the sensitive areas of Harry's lower body, Draco made his lover writhe and twitch before slowly parting his soul mate and dragging his tongue over the revealed orifice. A clean Harry had a very pleasant taste and Draco enjoyed the fact that it was a taste just for him. He heard his name whispered into the pillow as he concentrated on driving Harry to distraction.

It would have been so easy to let the arousal run free in his body and just reach for orgasm by the fastest route, but Draco could be very patient. He reached blindly for the small jar where he had left it as he continued to tongue Harry enthusiastically. The cap came off easily and he dipped his fingers inside enjoying the slick feeling of the lube and then in one swift movement he drew back his mouth and replaced it with one slick finger, slipping it inside Harry straight away. That caused an explosive moan and a momentary tensing of all of Harry's back muscles.

It was surprise rather than any discomfort that caused his lover's reaction and Draco smiled to himself in achievement. Even in this state with their bodies echoing each sensation in the other, he could still surprise Harry if he kept him distracted well enough. Harry soon relaxed again and Draco moved his finger in a little further and then out. A grunt greeted the removal of the intrusion and Harry moved to try and recapture the sensation at which point Draco bent back down and bit his lover's behind hard. Harry yelped and turned startled green eyes to look at him.

[My present,] Draco said in a petulant tone and pouted, [my rules.]

That drew a grin from Harry and the young man relaxed back onto the bed again.

[One request,] he replied as he buried his head in the pillow once more, [I'd like to be able to sit down when you're finished.]

In response Draco reinserted his finger at which point all coherent thought fled from his lover's mind with a moan of pleasure. Draco had to bite his tongue as the arousal in Harry threatened to take away his own lucidity and reduce him to a desire filled heap. Harry was tight around his finger, but his lover's muscles were slowly relaxing as Draco moved gently. He could feel the mirror of Harry's

reactions in his own body and he easily felt the moment his soul mate passed the point where he was ready for more. In reply he pulled his finger out slowly and then slipped in two. Harry's knuckles were white on the edges of the pillow and Draco could feel the strain as his lover tried to hold himself still in accordance with his previous intent.

[You can move, Love,] Draco told him silently and placed a kiss on the same spot he had bitten before, [let yourself go.]

Almost instantly Draco felt Harry push back on his hand and his fingers slipped in as far as they would go to the sound of the Gryffindor moaning into the bed.

[Do you like that, Harry?] he asked even though he already knew the answer: he could feel it. [Do you want more, Love?]

Harry groaned in reply, ever vocal, but strangely bashful about speaking.

"Tell me, Harry," Draco said aloud, "I can feel it, but I want you to tell me."

"More, Draco," his lover almost begged, "please more."

Harry's voice was heavy with arousal and the words sent strange thrills through Draco. He didn't hesitate as he felt the need growing within both of them and he gently pushed in a third finger against the tight muscle. Slick and slippery he slid his digits in slowly, waiting for the resistance to ease and having to concentrate to prevent himself pushing back on the ghostly echo of sensation in his own body. He could not resist rubbing his erection against Harry's leg and it almost sent his lover over the edge as the thrill this caused ran through them both, but Harry clung on to his arousal doggedly.

"Draco, please," Harry did beg this time, "I need you."

Draco had intended to play for longer, but he recognised the slight desperation in his lover and the resonance of the same sentiment in himself. Neither of them was going to last through any more games and he did not want this game to end this way. He pulled his fingers out in a smooth, gentle movement and pulled down his pyjama bottoms without ceremony. There was no doubt that he was as ready for this as Harry.

Harry raised his hips slightly and Draco positioned himself quickly at his lover's slick entrance. There was slight resistance when he first pushed in and he paused, allowing Harry to adjust before sliding in a little further. The tightness surrounding him and stimulating his nerve endings almost made Draco lose his precious control but he held on, just, even though Harry was biting on the pillow to stay on the edge with him and it was almost impossible.

Moving slowly, he pulled out almost all the way and drew a desperate whimper from his lover. They were both staring into the abyss and Draco knew there was little time left. Firmly he took hold of Harry's hips and with one strong, gradual movement, he pushed back in until he was buried in his soul mate to the hilt, and he found exactly the right spot as he sunk in. Harry yelled Draco's name into the pillow and shuddered uncontrollably as the sensation tipped him over the edge into orgasm. Draco had no choice but to follow his soul mate and spasmed into Harry with a cry of his own as he spilled his seed into the man he loved.

Little stars danced in front of Draco's eyes as he half collapsed over his lover, losing his grip on Harry's hips and placing his hands either side of the sated

Gryffindor while remaining buried deep within him. The trembling in his muscles did not stop for some time and Draco was breathing hard by the time he gathered his wits. Harry was relaxed and still beneath him as they stayed joined and allowed the after effects of their encounter run their course.

Only reluctantly did Draco break their contact and Harry signalled his equal discontent with a low growl, but did not try and stop him. When he collapsed onto the bed, his limbs felt as if all the muscles had been atrophied and all he could do was lay on his side and watch as Harry slowly turned to face him. His soul mate's pupils were dilated and a small smile played at his lips as he reached out and ran his hand down Draco's face and neck.

[One day you are going to have to teach me how you do that,] he said, his smile growing.

[Do what?] Draco asked as he tried to put his thoughts back into some kind of order.

[Hold everything in until the last second,] Harry replied and, after placing a kiss on Draco's nose, rolled onto his back.

The Slytherin laughed and decided that staying in the position he was in was probably a better idea than trying to move until he had some sort of sensible motor control.

[You're a Gryffindor, you should know all about being stubborn,] he replied lightly.

[Ah, but this is a whole new form of obstinacy,] Harry assured him cheerfully, [it must have taken years to learn.]

[It's inbred,] Draco told him and decided to risk moving and, although his arm shook when he lifted himself onto his elbow, it held.

Leaning over, avoiding the now messy bottom sheet, he planted a kiss on Harry's lips.

[Thank you, Harry,] he said with a loving smile, [I really like my first present.]

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As far as Draco was concerned, one way to describe Harry since his rather radical life change was 'sex maniac'. After their early morning tryst, the couple had retired to the prefect's bathroom to clean up and had not reappeared for three hours. Draco was wondering quietly to himself how things were still attached as he pulled on his clothes and noted that a healing charm or two might not go amiss if he wanted to sit down without squirming for the next couple of days.

It was not that he had not enjoyed himself: he had had the time of his life; it was just that Harry gave a whole new definition to the term 'sex slave'. His lover had played up to Draco's every desire, only, when the desires were being picked directly from your mind, he had found that control was a relative idea. Draco's thoughts and needs had driven the entire experience as if he was the master, but he smiled to himself wryly as he decided that somehow Harry had been in charge.

When Draco moved to stand up, he couldn't help it: he groaned as various muscles and a significant portion of his behind complained loudly. Harry was by his side instantly a sheepish apology in his eyes.

"Sorry," his soul mate said as if the whole thing was his fault.

It was not as if this was something new: they had had marathon sex sessions before, only the ones of this length had been while they were still in the hospital wing and moving had not been a requirement afterwards. By the looks of things, Harry was having a little problem walking normally as well and Draco couldn't help himself: he laughed.

"We make a right pair," he commented lightly, "if we go anywhere right now everyone is going to know exactly what we've been doing."

"They'll know anyway," Harry replied cheerfully. "Look at it this way, at least we're the only prefects staying for the holidays so no one was banging loudly on the door while we were actually at it."

That drew another laugh from Draco: three hours would have been a little over the top when waiting for a bath. He bent over to reach for his hair brush and wished he hadn't as another groan escaped his mouth: Quidditch aches and pains had nothing on the after effects of sex with the seething mass of hormones that Harry was these days.

"How are your healing spells?" he asked and gingerly sat back down on the bed. "If I'm going to walk straight for my test tomorrow I think I may need some help."

Harry sat down next to him and the grimace he gave mirrored the one Draco had made earlier. Draco couldn't help but smile: they had given each other some things to remember.

"I think I can manage something," Harry replied with a grin, "but would you like your other present first?"

His soul mate was bubbling over with anticipation and for a moment Draco considered teasing him, but then decided that they'd teased each other enough that morning already. He nodded and then on impulse leaned over and gave Harry a light kiss before the Gryffindor could stretch over the bed to the cabinet on the other side and retrieve a parcel from inside. The firm curve of buttock in black jeans that was presented as Harry did this was almost irresistible, but Draco managed to restrain himself from smacking, fondling or doing anything else to it.

When his soul mate sat back up, Harry presented Draco with a neatly wrapped, rectangular package in green and silver striped paper. Draco took it with a small smile and then calmly fondled the present to see if he could figure out what it was before he opened it. It was about a quarter of an inch thick and pliable in most directions except along one edge.

"It's a book," Draco said cheerfully as he felt round the edges. "So what can it be?" he continued to ramble as he began to undo the paper. "One hundred and one sex tips? Possibly the magical Karma Sutra?"

Harry laughed at that and shook his head fondly.

"Contrary to your favourite opinion I do occasionally think of things other than sex," the Gryffindor said with mock indignation.

"When?" Draco asked and put on his most angelic expression.

"Just open your present," his lover replied with another laugh.

Smiling broadly Draco went to work on the parcel in earnest, quickly revealing a brown, leather bound book. The back cover was facing him and he flipped it over quickly and then stopped dead. There on the front was the most beautiful dragon inlaid into the leather in silver and beneath it were the words "Volumen Medicatus". As Draco touched it the dragon reared and breathed silver flames over the inscription before returning to its original position.

"Now you can create your own spells and keep them safe," Harry said quietly as Draco ran his finger over the words on the book.

Wizards under the age of seventeen were prohibited from creating their own spells except under supervised conditions such as in a classroom; you could poison yourself with potions to your heart's content, but spells were not allowed. It was another stipulation of the underage wizardry laws, and a traditional coming of age gift in pureblood families was a Volumen Medicatus: a personal spell book. Draco could not begin to express what the gift meant to him.

"It's beautiful," was all he could find to say.

"It's charmed to you," Harry said hesitantly, "and, um, me in case of emergencies. Oh and it should never run out of pages because it'll keep growing more unless you tell it not to."

Harry was rambling because he was nervous, which was typical Harry. Even though his soul mate could tell what he was feeling, Harry was still anxious about the gift and it made Draco look up at him and smile.

"I love it," he said firmly and reached out to take Harry's hand, "it's perfect."

Only then did Harry actually relax.

"So what happens if someone who's not supposed to tries to use it?" Draco asked, intrigued by the protection on the book.

Personal spell books were often charmed to prevent people stealing them, but he could tell that this one was a very fine example of the craft and he suspected the protection would be something special as well.

"It'll look blank to anyone but us," Harry began to explain cheerfully, "and if they try and charm the answers out they'll end up temporarily blind, deaf, mute or any combination of all three. If anyone tries to write in it their quill will catch fire the first time and they'll catch fire if they try again. You can add people to the protection spells either permanently or for a given period of time so you can share it if you want to."

"Cool," Draco couldn't help himself and the terribly inelegant expression jumped to his lips. "I've been spending too much time with Gryffindors," he concluded as he realised what he'd said.

Harry smirked at him and the Slytherin made a face, but he soon smiled again. Then he leant over and rewarded his lover for his thoughtfulness with a deep, passionate kiss.

"Thank you," he said genuinely as he sat back.

It was as Draco relaxed again that his body reminded him about the earlier topic of conversation.

"Now about those healing charms," he continued with a small frown.

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They wandered to lunch in companionable silence and Harry couldn't help but admit that he was glad Draco was good at charms. Sitting down and walking without taking great care were no longer an issue, which made life so much easier. As they approached the great hall, he glanced at the spell book that Draco was proudly clutching.

[I still can't believe you wrote in it already,] Harry commented cheerfully.

[Needs must,] Draco replied with a grin, [and I thought the combination of the anti abrasion charm and the muscle relaxant spell was pure genius.]

[I just didn't expect your first spell to be for repairing damage caused by too much sex,] Harry said and laughed. [Call me old fashioned, but the idea never crossed my mind.]

[There is a huge gap in the market,] his lover told him in the most delighted fashion. [With a little more thought I could make a stunning career out of these types of spells.]

Harry gave his soul mate a look that caused Draco to smirk contentedly and then they walked into the great hall. There were no more than twenty students staying for the holidays and hence they were all on the one table with the members of staff who also remained. Dumbledore looked up and smiled warmly as the soul mates wandered in and took the seats that had become their place at the table over the holiday so far.

"Good afternoon, Gentlemen," the headmaster greeted cheerfully, "and may I be the first here to wish you a very happy birthday, Draco. I do hope you are enjoying it so far."

"Can't complain," the Slytherin replied and sent Harry a very suggestive look which caused him to feel a blush begin to rise up his face.

Harry sat down and reached for some food to cover it at which point he locked gazes with an unimpressed looking Snape. The dour wizard raised an eyebrow at him and then went back to his plate.

"There were several owls for you at breakfast, Draco," Dumbledore continued conversationally, "I took the liberty of keeping your mail for you until such time as you chose to join us today."

Harry watched as the headmaster delved into his voluminous robe and produced two small packages and two letters.

"Thank you, Professor," Draco said politely and piled the post beside his plate, "that was very kind of you."

The old wizard's eyes sparkled with delight and Harry couldn't help smiling. As a fair percentage of the school had discovered since the pair had bonded, when Draco was not playing the role of Death Eater he had impeccable manners.

His soul mate did not immediately open any of his post, but instead mirrored Harry's act of loading his plate with food. The initial adjustments to their bond had worn off somewhat, but when they missed a meal they still knew about it and as Harry set about eating he was very glad to fill the hole his stomach had become. Harry reckoned that he could put away at least twice as many calories as most of his fellow seventh years without even coming close to putting on any weight, as could Draco, although it was no longer a requirement for remaining upright.

It was only after they had both demolished enough food for a small army and Harry was chatting about Transfiguration with the sixth year Ravenclaw beside him that Draco picked up the smaller of the two packages.

[No return address, no tag,] the Slytherin commented and calmly began to open it.

Harry rounded up his conversation quickly and turned curiously to see what his soul mate had received, just as Draco pulled a small, felt-wrapped bundle from the brown paper.

[Feels very solid,] Draco said thoughtfully and placed it on the table.

As Harry watched his soul mate calmly pulled out his wand and cast a quick revealing charm on the object. The little cloth-covered shape gave off a faint blue glow.

"Charmed, but not dangerously so," Dumbledore said with a benevolent smile and Harry had the feeling the headmaster had probably already checked the gift for booby traps.

Putting his wand back up his sleeve Draco picked up the bundle once more and carefully unwrapped it. What he revealed looked to Harry like an ordinary Muggle penknife, until that was, Draco moved it so that the front side was visible. Curled on the silver coloured surface was a small gold snake in exquisite detail and as it was scrutinised it lifted its head and opened clear blue eyes.

"Master," it hissed as Draco stared at it and almost instantly he looked to Harry for an explanation.

[It called you 'Master',] he translated straight away.

[Ask it what it's for,] Draco requested as he looked into the crystal eyes.

Before he did as he was asked Harry let his mind sink closer to his soul mate's and opened his perceptions to Draco.

"What is your purpose?" he hissed at the enchanted object in parseltongue. [And it's a he,] he told his lover calmly.

He couldn't help but notice that the entire table was watching him, but Harry felt this was rather important.

"To decorate and protect," the snake replied and turned his eyes on the Gryffindor. "You are my master's mate, I was told about you. I will not bite you, only those who try and steal me."

Since Harry heard English when listening to Parseltonge and Draco was as good at using the Hecatemus' ears there was no need to translate. The pair shared a look.

[Ask him who sent him,] Draco said thoughtfully and Harry did.

"My maker sent me," the snake said and swayed a little more off the knife, "but I do not know who asked him to create me. I was shown my Master's likeness and instructed to obey him in all things. I am beautiful, am I not?"

"[Yes you are very beautiful,]" Harry replied with a slight smile: it never hurt to compliment a snake, even when it wasn't a real one.

"May I sleep now, Master?" the snake asked, looking back at Draco as if it knew he understood what it was saying. "You may wake me whenever you like by calling my name."

[Tell him yes, he may sleep,] Draco offered quickly, [and ask him his name.]

The sibilant language rolled from Harry's mouth like it was his native tongue and the snake bobbed its head as he spoke.

"Thank you, Master," the enchanted creature replied. "My name is Calonis."

Then the snake wound itself back onto the penknife and was once again nothing more than a gold decoration.

"A beautiful and intriguing gift," Dumbledore commented as Draco began to investigate the various blades and other gadgets on the knife.

"Who sent it, Mr Malfoy?" it was Snape who came straight to the point.

"I don't know," Draco said, seemly unconcerned that his house master had asked what could have been construed as a rude question, "there's nothing on it at all and the snake doesn't know."

Harry could tell that Draco was curious, but he was also aware that his soul mate was not worried. If one of the most devious people on the face of the planet was not worried, Harry decided that neither was he.

"An anonymous admirer then," Dumbledore said cheerfully and Harry found himself looking at the headmaster.

For some reason, he had the distinct impression that Dumbledore suspected something. The headmaster smiled blandly at him and gave no proof one way or the other, but Harry couldn't help but wonder. Draco finished examining the penknife and placed it reverently on top of the spell book Harry had given him. Then, under Harry's curious gaze he moved on to the second parcel.

Very quickly that produced a chocolate frog and a packet of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans with a note from Hermione and Ron wishing Draco a Happy Birthday. One of the cards was from Remus wishing Draco many happy returns in his usual understated way and then the Slytherin moved on to the last envelope. By this time, the whole table was openly watching and Draco peeled the covering off what was another card extra slowly to make them wait. Harry had long since come to terms with the fact that his soul mate liked to torture people although Draco confined himself to mundane methods these days.

The card had "You're only 17 once" emblazoned on the front in large cheerful letters and as Draco opened it a chorus of voices yelled at the top of their lungs "Happy Birthday". Shock lanced through his soul mate and hence through Harry and the Slytherin dropped the object on the table and just stared at it. Around a large "Happy Birthday" that was giving off little fireworks were lots of short greetings and signatures. At a quick glance Harry could tell the entire Gryffindor house had signed the card.

A quick look down the table at the other Gryffindors sitting at lunch showed Harry people looking very pleased with themselves. Draco didn't appear to know how to respond and he felt a little over awed. When Gryffindor adopted you they really adopted you and until that moment Harry was pretty sure his soul mate had not realised this.

[They sent me one over the Summer, too,] he decided to try and help his lover regain his composure with camaraderie, [it's a McGonagall tradition for coming of age.]

[But I'm a Slytherin,] Draco replied, still staring at the card.

[I hate to break it to you,] Harry said and rested a hand on his lover's knee, [but you are officially Gryffindor's Slytherin. There's no escape now: you're stuck; trapped for life; marked for good...]

Draco thumped him on the arm to make him shut up, but he was grinning wryly.

[I get the idea,] he said with mock petulance, but picked up the card to read it anyway.

Harry sat back and shared a smile with the other Gryffindors and Dumbledore: at the beginning of the year he never would have imagined that he'd be sitting beside Draco Malfoy commiserating with him about being adopted into Gryffindor. Sometimes the current state of affairs simply amazed Harry.

Chapter 23 London and Back Again

Getting to London was not as easy as it could have been. They couldn't floo because it was impossible to put both of them in the fireplace at the same time. Being separated by any distance was not something either of them wanted to try just at the moment and that was what the floo network would do to them. Apparating was not an option, because illegally Apparating into the Ministry of Magic just before your test was likely to achieve a fail even if they couldn't prosecute you. Hence the fastest alternative was a portkey which Dumbledore had presented to them as soon as Draco had agreed to the trip.

The portkey destination point was 12 Grimmauld place for safety, but the meeting with the Order was not set until the afternoon. Hence only Tonks and Remus Lupin were waiting for them in the living room of the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. Today Tonks' hair was green and silver, a colour scheme that was not lost on Draco.

"Harry," the Auror greeted brightly, "it's so lovely to see you again."

She bounced on the spot scarily like Hilde often did and refrained from coming any closer.

"And this must be the famous Draco Malfoy," Tonks continued cheerfully, "funny he doesn't look much like the spawn of a Dementor and a demon to me, Moody must have been exaggerating."

A spike of amusement ran through the blond wizard, transferring to Harry and causing him to smile: Tonks was almost as good at breaking the ice as she was at breaking everything else.

"Pleased to meet you," Draco greeted politely and offered his hand to the young woman, "I must say I'm impressed with the hair."

Tonks stepped forward to take the offer of friendship and almost fell over the edge of the rug.

"There's nothing like solidarity," she said with a smile and steadied herself before shaking the offered limb, "and it pisses off several of my colleagues which is an added bonus."

Draco grinned at her, moving back to Harry's side.

"Harry, Draco," Remus greeted with his usual understated smile.

"Hello, Remus," both young men greeted simultaneously which drew a wider grin from the older man.

They had corresponded by owl several times with the werewolf, but this was the first time they had met face to face since Harry's life altering change. The Order had been very busy over the last few months and although Remus had expressed his desire to visit there had been no time.

"Although it would be lovely to chat," Remus said politely, "I'm afraid we have to hurry."

"We borrowed a car from the Ministry," Tonks explained with a conspiratorial grin, "and there is only so long before it will be missed."

Remus appeared rather embarrassed by the whole situation, but Harry found it fairly amusing and Draco was impressed.

[This day becomes more and more interesting,] the Slytherin commented as their hosts indicated they should leave the room.

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At first the Apparating examiner; a small bespectacled woman who did not look as if she ever left the building, had tried to make Harry wait outside the test centre, but Remus had taken the oblivious bureaucrat aside and when the two had returned there had been no objection to both young men entering. Harry remembered the long panelled room well, although taking his test had been strangely anticlimactic. Draco felt completely calm as they walked in and Harry remembered being the same way; in their world this was such a little thing that it was almost funny.

The test was actually very simple: the examiner would ask some detailed questions about the spell to make sure the candidate knew what they were about to do, after which the candidate had to give a practical demonstration twice to prove that the first time wasn't a fluke. Ron had failed the verbal part of the test the first time he took it so the examiner hadn't let him take the practical; the second time he had learned the book definition by heart. Draco had probably known the book definition by heart since he was five and Harry had no doubts about his lover's practical ability so this was all just a formality.

Hovering by the doorway Harry watched as the examiner asked Draco several questions from her clipboard. Draco had chosen some figure hugging black jeans and a green silk shirt for their outing to London and Harry had no problem entertaining himself by ogling his soul mate.

[If you want me to splinch myself you're going the right way about it,] Draco's mental voice chided him lightly after a few seconds. [Do you think you could keep your mind off sex for five minutes?]

[I warned you about the jeans,] Harry replied without any sign of remorse, [and don't try and fool me, you could perform any spell even if I was shagging you senseless.]

[Hmm, I'm not sure whether to be insulted or take that as a compliment,] Draco replied and then turned back to answering the examiner.

Harry leant against the wall and continued to admire his lover. It did not take more than a few minutes before the examiner led Draco towards the far end of the room where she stood him on a cross on the floor. Then the woman started to give the Slytherin a small talk on the safety procedures, at which point Draco looked up with a pained expression.

[I wish she would just let me Apparate and then we can get out of here,] Draco said pointedly.

Harry smiled at his soul mate and continued to lean on the wall.

"When you're ready, Mr Malfoy," the woman eventually said, quite loudly.

"Thank you," Draco said aloud and [About time,] he grumbled silently.

As Harry watched, his lover pulled out his wand and firmly cast the spell. With a crack, Draco disappeared and reappeared at the near end of the room almost instantly. Harry knew he had gone white and the blond wizard looked at him anxiously.

[What's wrong?] his soul mate asked urgently.

[Finish the test,] Harry replied quickly without answering the question, [I'll be fine.]

[Harry ...] Draco replied knowing that Harry was not telling him something.

[Please, just finish it so we can leave,] Harry told his soul mate and attempted to stop his stomach lurching.

Not looking very happy Draco did as he was told and shortly there was another crack and he disappeared and reappeared back on the cross. Harry was reaching for the door handle before the examiner handed Draco his pass certificate and Draco almost didn't wait for it as he made a beeline for Harry's side.

[Okay, now you tell me what's wrong,] Draco insisted as he took hold of Harry's elbow and helped him through the doorway.

Remus and Tonks both climbed to their feet when their eyes fell on him: he knew he probably looked awful.

"What on earth happened to you?" Lupin asked anxiously.

"That's what I want to know," Draco said pointedly.

"I'm fine," Harry promised faithfully, "but I don't think Apparating is ever going to be one of my favourite things."

"Harry, you look like a Dementor just walked up to you," Tonks pointed out unhelpfully.

Draco also felt as though he was not about to take an 'I'm fine' as an answer.

"You know that loud crack," Harry said as he realised he had to explain.

The other three nodded, looking concerned. Draco's hand on his back was a great comfort and Harry was beginning to feel an idiot for being the centre of attention again.

"That's the universe going ouch," he explained it in the only way he could think of. "I'm sure I'll get used to it."

[This isn't in any of the books,] Draco said worriedly.

[Maybe it's part of the training I missed,] Harry suggested reasonably, [it's nothing to worry about.]

[Where you're concerned I'll decide what to worry about,] his soul mate replied firmly. [Are you sure you're okay?]

"I'm fine," Harry insisted aloud so everyone could hear him.

No one appeared convinced.

"Plan B," Remus said with a worried look in Harry's direction.

Tonks nodded and before either Harry or Draco could enquire as to what the pair were on about the Auror turned and strode off down the corridor.

"Care to explain?" Draco asked in a less than happy tone.

The Slytherin did not like it when he did not know what was going on and he liked it less when he didn't know and it involved Harry, and the fact Harry was not well was not helping matters. Harry could tell that his soul mate was only just holding himself in check.

"Plan A was that Draco passes the test and we all Apparate back to base," Remus said openly. "Plan B involves borrowing the car from where we put it back."

This made Draco appear and feel a whole lot happier, and Harry decided that he really didn't care what was going on as long as he could have a nice sit down very soon.

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The journey back to Grimmauld Place was blessedly uneventful and thankfully by the time they reached the safety of the Order headquarters Harry no longer appeared as if he was about to die. It took another half an hour to convince Draco that he was okay, but the Gryffindor did finally manage to talk his lover into going ahead with the meeting that had been previously arranged. This meant that tea time found the couple ushered into the dining room to find it full of people all looking at them expectantly.

Harry felt suddenly as if he was living in a goldfish bowl and perversely found himself placing his body between Draco and everyone else in the room. It was not that any of the Order were looking at his soul mate with open hostility, well except Moody, but the man appeared that way all the time, it was just the overall atmosphere of tension in the room. Draco usually protected Harry from the rest of the world, but in this room the Gryffindor was the one ready to shield his lover.

"Welcome everyone," Dumbledore greeted brightly as if this was simply a little Christmas drinks gathering, "thank you all so much for coming."

Letting his gaze wander around the room, Harry was glad to see that he knew, at least in passing, everyone the headmaster had chosen to invite. He had by no means met all of the Order, although he knew most of them by sight, but all those in the room were members with whom he had had, at minimum, one conversation. Those in attendance were: Mad-eye, looking as paranoid as ever; Tonks, who was still sporting the green and silver hair; Remus quietly standing in the corner; Mudungus Fletcher lounging in the background as if waiting for some illicit deal; Molly, Arthur and Bill Weasley standing in a family group; Kingsley Shacklebolt hovering calmly with Emeline Vance; and finally Daedelus Diggle watching the whole proceedings with interest.

"As you all know there have been some interesting developments in the last half of the year," Dumbledore continued cheerfully, "and we are here to welcome our newest member. Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present Draco Malfoy."

From the expressions on at least a couple of faces Harry was not sure everyone was happy about the headmaster's pronouncement, but it didn't look as if anyone would openly argue. No one not of age was allowed to enter the Order of the Phoenix, but Harry had been officially recognised as a member when he turned seventeen, and Dumbledore had informed Draco that, should he wish it, he would also be accepted within the ranks when he bonded with the Hecatemus. Draco had chosen to accept as soon as he reached seventeen just to make a statement.

[I'm getting just the slightest sense of hostility,] Draco commented dryly from slightly behind Harry.

[Not hostile,] Harry replied evenly and took a quick look with his other senses just to make sure he was not reading the situation incorrectly, [just wary. Turn on the charm and they'll be eating out of your hand in minutes.]

The tension in the room caused his heart to flutter a little, but he was not about to give in to an attack of nerves when Draco needed him.

"Molly has provided us with some lovely refreshments," Dumbledore continued in his carefree tone, "please do dig in."

That was it, the cue for the inquisition to begin. It was not that everyone moved in en masse, everyone was very polite about it, but Harry was in no doubt that the whole room was lining up to quiz him and Draco about everything. Draco rose to the occasion like the practiced charmer he was and Harry used his position as the Boy Who Lived with far more directness than he usually did. They moved around the room talking politely and answering, what at times, could have been considered rather personal questions.

Diggle was the first to make the mistake of trying to separate the pair. Harry had the suspicion that the man was working with Moody on a strategy to place Draco on his own so the retired Auror could question the Slytherin, but Diggle was the diversion and hence the noticeable bit. When the man tried to reach between the couple to the table in an effort to unglue them from each other's side Draco was between Harry and Daedelus like a shot. Draco no longer found himself with his wand in his hand for no reason, but it was very easy to make him angry to the point where he made his displeasure known. Harry could feel the anger that coursed through his lover.

"Don't try that again," the annoyed Slytherin warned in a very menacing tone.

Diggle was so taken aback by the venom in Draco's tone that the man didn't even try and pretend that he had not made the move deliberately.

"Now, Boy," Moody chose that moment to make himself known, "no need to be so defensive."

That was precisely the wrong thing to say to Draco in his current mood, and it was especially bad since Harry was at the centre of his soul mate's current reasoning.

"I am not a boy," Draco said very precisely. "You may call me by my last name if you wish, but do not assume because you are on the far side of your prime you may refer to me as a child."

It never ceased to impress Harry quite what a grasp of language as a weapon his lover possessed.

"You claim to be an adult," Moody replied in kind, "and yet you throw a temper tantrum when one person steps between you and your lover."

The hot anger Draco had been feeling had morphed in a much colder fury as he faced the old Auror, and Harry stood close to his soul mate in case the rage turn hot and dangerous again. As it was Draco turned a glare which could have caused the next ice age on Moody.

"An interesting choice of words," Draco said, knowing that he had the whole room focused on him. "You should have seen me when we first bonded, Diggle would have been on the other side of the room trying to figure out which way was up if he had tried that then. I will not allow anyone in this room to come close to Harry; he's had enough stress for one day and no one gets a chance to hurt him, deliberately or by accident. That is how things are and it is how things are going to stay. Is that clear?"

From the expression on his face, Moody was not impressed.

"If I had my way, Boy," the Auror replied with a tone which matched Draco's, "I'd have you dosed with Veratasium and singing your life story before I let you near this Order. With your father..."

Harry did not wait to find out what his lover's reaction would be to that one; that was a step over the line.

"Draco is not his father," he said and found that he was as capable of anger on behalf of his soul mate as Draco was, although his was neither icily calm nor collected. "The next person who suggests that he is learns the meaning of the words 'foot in mouth', literally."

The headache Harry had managed to shift after the Apparating incident was suddenly back full force as he let his temper get the better of him. Draco's presence intensified in his mind as he sensed his distress, but Harry let none of this show on the outside. It was almost impossible to win a battle of wills with Mad-eye Moody, but Harry was game to try.

There may well have been an all our argument but for one thing: Harry's body chose that moment to decide enough was enough and everything was suddenly very surreal. Exposure to Draco Apparating had been a very bad shock to his system and it was obviously not yet recovered. Harry did not faint, but he came very close, and when the world made sense again he was sitting in a chair with Draco looking anxiously into his face.

[Back with me, Love?] his soul mate asked silently.

[Just about,] Harry replied honestly.

[I'm taking you home,] was Draco's deliberate affirmation, and thus ended the now rather tense meeting.

With a glare that challenged anyone to try and stop him Draco went about arranging transport back to Hogwarts.

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"Not being able to Apparate is not the end of the world," Draco was standing in front of Harry with his hands on his hips, glaring at the Hecatemus. "Some wizards never even learn because it's too much trouble."

"I'm not some wizard," Harry replied, more than a little annoyed with his lover's stubborn attitude.

They had been throwing the same idea around for the last twenty minutes and Draco was being very obstinate.

"If I'm suddenly surrounded by Death Eaters I need to be able to get away," Harry continued his argument. "At the moment just the thought of Apparating is enough to make me splinch myself and it's not good enough."

"Harry," Draco said with a very exasperated and yet also sympathetic tone to his voice, "you nearly fainted yesterday because I Apparated; doesn't this tell you about what it could do to you if you try it yourself?"

It was true that Apparating at that moment, had they been somewhere that the spell would work, would have been a really bad idea, however, Harry suspected his problem with it would be the same as many other inconveniences he had had with his condition.

"The first time you Apparated was a shock," he admitted openly, "and the second time wasn't much better, but there was a difference. I know it's never going to be my favourite means of transportation, but I think we can bring it to a level where I will be able to use it."

The exasperation was still hovering in Draco's features and in his feelings, but Harry could tell that his argument had had an effect. If there was one thing his lover responded to well it was logic, even if it took a while to convey said logic in any way that Draco would accept.

"There's no where to practice," Draco pointed out, clearly unhappy with the whole idea, but conceding Harry had a point.

At that Harry knew he had won, at least a partial victory, because he knew something Draco didn't.

"Actually there is," he said and managed to keep the triumph off his face even though he was sure his soul mate would have felt it anyway.

Draco raised one elegant eyebrow at that piece of information.

"Why does it not surprise me that you know a way around the no Apparating at Hogwarts constant that the rest of the universe has to obey?" the sarcasm dripped from his lover's tongue with ease, but Harry could tell Draco was put out rather than out and out annoyed.

"Where do you think I learnt?" Harry pointed out with a grin. "My relatives were not exactly likely to have let me practice there and I passed less than a month after I turned seventeen. I was taught last year, here, by the Order."

The expression on Draco's face showed that he hadn't thought about it like that.

"How?" his lover, asked, honestly curious.

"Room of requirement," Harry replied simply.

The thoughtful expression on his lover's face told him that Draco was considering the idea, but Harry could tell his soul mate was still confused.

"Surely allowing anyone to Apparate in Hogwarts would open the wards to attack?" Draco voiced his problem with the concept.

Harry shook his head and tried to remember how Dumbledore had explained it when he had first told him that he would be having extra lessons.

"It doesn't allow anyone to Apparate in or out," he explained quickly, "it forms a bubble inside the wards that is free of the restriction, but not connected with the outside world."

Draco looked and felt surprised.

"A little universe of its own?" he said as he reasoned it out. "That's hideously complicated magic."

"The whole of Hogwarts is hideously complicated magic, trust me I can see it," Harry replied with a grin. "I think the room of requirement is probably the most complicated bit and I don't believe there's a wizard alive today who could figure it out."

A ghost of a smile flowed across Draco's features at his soul mate's quip, but as soon as it arrived it was gone again and he appeared pensive. It was obvious to Harry that his lover knew he was beaten in this argument, but Draco was still worried by the whole idea. If Harry hadn't believed this really was as important as he said he would have backed down.

[I know this is going to be nasty for both of us,] Harry said silently and took Draco's hand, [but I honestly believe it has to be done. If nothing else, I need to do this.]

Draco did not look pleased and his mouth was set in a taut line, but he nodded anyway. It was not going to be a pleasant day, Harry was sure of that, but he hoped that it would be a productive one.

[Let's find this bloody room then,] Draco said reluctantly.

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Remus had returned to Hogwarts with the others the previous day on Order business, and he was sitting in the headmaster's office next to Professor Dumbledore when Draco dragged Harry into the room. They had spent the whole day in the room of requirement and Harry had wanted to fall into bed and die quietly, but an invitation to dinner in his office had come from Dumbledore before they had had a chance to raid the kitchens. They hadn't eaten since breakfast and both were hungry so they did not wait long before answering the summons. Harry had a headache the size of a Hippogryph, which the potion he had taken to relieve it was failing to even touch, and Draco wasn't much better.

Remus' face went from a smile as he turned to greet the pair to something akin to horror and Harry wondered quite what they looked like. The couple had showered and changed, but Harry had avoided all mirrors knowing that he would

not like what he saw, and now he was thinking that maybe he should have had a look.

"Harry, you look like you died," the voice behind him surprised him and he turned to see Tonks walking into the room after them, "three weeks ago."

Harry didn't think that the tag was necessary. He wondered briefly when Tonks had arrived at the school and what she was doing here, but he also knew if it was important Dumbledore would tell him. These days the headmaster did not keep anything that Harry could need to know from him.

"And, Draco, I don't think you expired much after him," the currently quite non-descript Auror commented in her usual up-front manner.

"Quite," Remus joined his fellow Order member in speaking, "what in Merlin's name have you been doing?"

Harry was far too tired to engage in a battle of words with anyone and stand at the same time so he sank into the nearest chair before attempting to think of a reply. Since his brain was not functioning at top capacity Draco answered the question first.

"Apparating practice," his soul mate said and bonelessly folded into the seat next to his him, "and it was all Harry's idea so don't blame me."

Remus had the kind of look on his face that Harry imagined was usually reserved for fathers whose children had done something incredibly stupid. Harry felt warmed by the obvious emotion in the last remaining Marauder, but he didn't really want to have an argument now.

"Apparating?" the werewolf said slightly incredulously. "After Harry's reaction yesterday you both thought this was a good idea?"

"I had several other suggestions to occupy today," Draco replied sarcastically, "but I was overruled."

For once his soul mate was placing all the blame at Harry's feet and he was quite willing to take it: after all it had been his decision. Remus was all but glaring at the him.

"I needed to figure it out," he said with as much conviction as he could muster considering that he was ready to fall asleep at any moment. "I need to be able to Apparate and now I can."

That rather stopped anything Remus was about to say and the werewolf looked over at Draco who nodded to confirm what his lover had said.

"He fainted four times, would have been sick more if he'd had anything left to bring up after the second time and we both have headaches that could lay out a dragon," the Slytherin said peevishly, "but the idiot of a Gryffindor can now Apparate without killing me or him."

Pain did not put Draco in a good mood, and since this was all Harry's idea his lover was not going to let him off scott free. Harry spared his soul mate a glare for working up Remus even more and prepared for the reaction.

"And you didn't think fainting was a good reason to stop?" the werewolf sounded about ready to lock Harry somewhere safe and never let him out.

The hard tone of Remus' voice cut straight into Harry's pounding head and he winced.

"It would have been a very short practice session," he responded tersely.

He was not about to apologise for something he knew he had needed to do. The only guilt he felt about the whole exercise was that Draco was suffering along with him.

"How could you let him do something so stupid?" Remus demanded of Draco at which point Harry had had enough.

He could have dealt with the werewolf's concern and worry all night, but he was not going to let Draco take any blame.

"I made him," Harry said in a very firm tone and dragged every eye in the room to him effortlessly.

Tonks was looking quite surprised by the annoyance in Harry's voice; Dumbledore appeared to understand; and Remus was caught between shock and anxiety.

"Remus," Harry began again, moderating his voice and letting the tiredness creep back into it, "I had to get through this. The only one I will apologise to about this is Draco because he feels worse than he looks and it's all my fault. This was important; I could not allow myself to be helpless."

Something changed in the werewolf's eyes then; something shifted, but Harry didn't quite know what it was. For a moment Remus just looked at him and then the werewolf nodded.

"How did you become a man and I never realised, Harry?" the man who was like a very fond uncle asked, with a note of respect in his voice which caused a lump to come to Harry's throat.

He didn't really know what to say; it was one thing to be told you were an adult by a bunch of bureaucrats; it was another entirely to have it acknowledged in such a personal manner.

"Don't mind him," Tonks said irreverently as the silence grew beyond anything remotely comfortable. "Remus has always been slow to notice these things."

That caused Remus to gain a put out look and Draco to chuckle, even though the Slytherin was still nursing a nasty headache.

Chapter 24 A Very Weasley Christmas

"Ready?" Draco asked and squeezed Harry's hand as he considered his answer.

The invitation to Christmas dinner at the Weasleys had arrived by owl the previous morning and Harry had been really enthusiastic until he realised that there was only one way they could make it to the Burrow was to Apparate. Short distances were one thing, but he hadn't been sure about trying it over such a long journey. He had almost written a note to politely refuse the invitation, but a comment from Snape at the lunch table the previous day had brought out his stubborn side.

Draco had been less than pleased with the idea, but had not objected. Harry had proved he could Apparate without splinching himself so his soul mate was only worried about how ill it would make Harry feel. Their little experiments had proved that the Hecatemus was very sensitive to the mode of transport, but it was like everything else in their world now: Harry could deal with it if he needed to.

"As I'll ever be," he finally said and tried to smile.

They both had their wands clutched in their hands and a large bag of presents between them. The pair had practised Apparating together all the previous afternoon in the room of requirement so they had the spell down to a fine art. Taking a deep breath Harry lifted his wand, opened his mind so he was perfectly in tune with Draco and then they both cast the spell. He did not hear the crack of them Disapparating nor was he really aware of the crack that announced their arrival at their destination, all he noticed was the fact that his stomach was heaving and the world was spinning.

Harry sat down heavily, regardless of what he might be sitting on and begged for the universe to forgive him. A hand around his shoulders steadied the world somewhat but he still couldn't focus.

"For future reference," he said more to try and distract himself from the nausea than anything else, "distance makes it worse. There has to be a better way of getting about than this."

"Next time we'll borrow a Thestral or two," Draco said and waved a couple of fingers in front of Harry's face. "How many?"

"Two," the Hecatemus replied as his eyes finally began to behave.

"Good," his soul mate said with a smile, "you're better than after the first try the other day at least. You look like death warmed over, but at least you're not going to pass out on me, I don't think I can carry you and the presents into the house."

Harry snorted a laugh and pushed his glasses properly onto his nose.

"How about helping me up then?" he asked cheerfully: his stomach was still doing little flip-flops, but the world had come to a stop.

Shaking his head and rolling his eyes, Draco reached out his arm and Harry grasped it just below the elbow as his lover's fingers wound round his own forearm. With a firm tug Draco helped Harry to his feet.

[Do I really look like death warmed over?] Harry asked as he surveyed the front of the Weasleys' house.

Draco nodded with a wry grin.

[If I hid in the dungeons for a month and didn't come out I'd still have more colour than you at the moment,] his lover told him and released his grip on Harry's arm.

Draco also helpfully flashed Harry an image of what he looked like and he had to agree that the almost grey skin and little pink spots on his cheeks did make him appear as if he was about to keel over. Harry gave a groan of resignation and tried to will some colour back into his face: the last thing he wanted was to worry anyone.

[There really does have to be a better way to travel,] he said firmly and went to reach for the bag of presents.

With a quick step and a swift grab, of which Harry was incapable at the moment, Draco made it to the gifts first.

"I don't think so, Father Christmas," the blond youth said with a shake of his head and an amused smile. "If you want to make it to the door upright you'll let this elf carry the presents for you."

The image of Draco with pointy ears and a little green hat leapt into Harry's thoughts and he couldn't help but grin. Wizards often scoffed at Muggle things, but it was amazing how many Muggle ideas spilled over. Wizards might not drink Coke, but Santa Claus still wore a red suit and was helped by a whole hoard of short men.

Harry held out his hand and Draco took it Harry sured up his shields, then they walked to the Weasley's house. Since both of Draco's hands were occupied Harry knocked and they waited. A very happy looking Arthur Weasley opened the door after a few seconds, and by the cheerful red tinge to his face, Harry thought Ron's father had probably been enjoying the Christmas sherry already.

"Come in, come in," the wizard greeted cheerfully and stepped backwards into the house. "Welcome to the madhouse."

Arthur at least did not appear to notice that Harry was auditioning for the part of the ghost of Christmas future.

"Thank you, Mr Weasley," Draco said in what Harry referred to as the 'charming-of-his-elders' mode.

"Arthur, please," Ron's Dad replied brightly. "You're the last to arrive so I'm afraid we've been on the Christmas cheer for a while without you. Everyone's in the living room."

Harry briefly wondered how it was possible to cram the entire Weasley family plus Hermione and her parents into the Burrow's main room: he found out when he and Draco walked in. It appeared that someone in the household had been doing some serious magic, because the kitchen and the living room had expanded quite dramatically.

"Room expanding spell," Arthur said proudly as Harry stared. "It only lasts twenty four hours, but it's useful while it works."

"Wow," was all Harry could find to say: the effect was quite spectacular.

Every one else was gathered around the large sofa and assorted chairs in front of the Weasley's large fire place and every face turned towards them as they entered. Hermione and Ron were on their feet instantly and came dashing over, even though it had only been a week since they had seen their friends. Hermione gave Draco a warm hug and then Harry a much shorter, but equally enthusiastic one as Ron grinned at them happily.

It took Hermione looking at Harry critically and about another ten seconds for Ron's smile to turn into a frown.

"Mate, you look like one of Sprout's death's head roots, are you okay?" his best friend asked in a very concerned tone.

"I'm fine," Harry promised and gave Ron the most cheerful smile he could muster. "Ask me when you get back to school and I'll explain in detail why I really hate Apparating."

Neither of his Gryffindor friends looked convinced and both turned to Draco, which made Harry role his eyes.

"He is fine," his soul mate confirmed with a grin at Harry's resigned mental sigh, "or at least he will be in a few minutes."

Harry shook his head.

"Why does no one believe me when I say I'm fine?" he asked good-naturedly.

"Harry, you'd say 'I'm fine' if you'd been poisoned by a basilisk and your arm was falling off," Hermione pointed out and patted him fondly on the hand.

That caused several laughs from the rest of the Weasley's, although Molly was eyeing Harry in a way that suggested to him he was about to be mothered within an inch of his life.

"Let me take your cloaks, and then we can all sit down," Arthur suggested cheerfully. "And while we're doing that you can decide what you'd like to drink. We have mulled wine, Christmas punch made to Molly's mother's secret family recipe, or hot chocolate -- Weasley style."

Harry reached up to unfasten his cloak as he wondered what was actually in the Christmas punch.

"I couldn't possibly turn down an old family recipe," Draco said charmingly as he disengaged himself from his outer garment and handed it to Arthur, "I'll have the punch please, and no matter what Harry says, he'll have the hot chocolate: he needs the calories."

Harry opened his mouth to protest and his lover looked at him with one raised eyebrow: Harry decided against disagreeing. This caused a giggle from both Hermione and Ginny and Harry couldn't help thinking the whole incident had been filed under 'cute' along with fluffy bunnies and little pink hearts.

"We were beginning to wonder if you'd ever get here," Ron complained good-naturedly with a confused look at his girlfriend's knowing smile.

"Oh you know Draco," Harry said with a grin as the opportunity arose to get his own back, "it took him three hours to decide what to wear."

[You will pay for that,] his soul mate returned and smiled wickedly.

[Going to tie me up and spank me?] Harry asked nonchalantly.

[You wish,] was the light reply.

They were dragged into the living room where Fred and George immediately moved off the sofa onto the floor and the couple were forced into the vacated seats. Harry sat at the end, which was next to the chair from which Hermione's father was observing the whole proceedings, and Draco was in the middle of the three-seater between Harry and Ginny. After a brief introduction for those who had not yet met, the drinks arrived. Harry's hot chocolate was in an absolutely huge mug and crazy coloured marshmallows floated all over the top of it. As he tucked in he had to admit Draco had made the right selection as he felt the sugar head straight into his system.

[Repeat after me,] his lover's mental voice said playfully. [Draco knows best, always listen to Draco,] they finished together.

Harry tried desperately not to snort hot chocolate down his nose.

"Are you all right, dear?" Molly asked as the young man all but choked.

"Marshmallow," he covered smoothly, "stuck to the back of my throat for a moment."

The look Hermione sent him told Harry that she knew it had been no such thing, but she was trying not to laugh so he didn't think he was in trouble.

"Can we do presents now?" Fred and George chimed in with a beautifully petulant whine.

Everyone except Molly found this hilariously funny and after a moment even her motherly, reproachful frown turned into a smile: the twins charm was irresistible to their mother and Harry couldn't help feeling very warm and happy as he watched the family interplay. The Weasley household was always organised chaos, but it was also always so happy at times like this. It was nice to see Percy back among his siblings as well. It had taken a long time to mend the rift in the redheaded clan, but it had finally happened just before the Summer and it had made Molly so happy.

There were a lot of presents what with there being fourteen people in the house with several gifts for each person. Harry and Draco had brought things for everyone; there was a parcel for everyone from Molly and Arthur, and in the case of their children two; the twins had gifts for all as well; Hermione and her parents had clubbed together and bought everyone something as had Ron, Ginny and Percy; and Bill and Charlie hadn't produced any parcels, but the way they were looking at each other while everyone else passed out their presents to people, they had something else up their sleeves.

Harry was really enjoying himself, especially since every time Draco was passed a gift-wrapped bundle a small shot of amazement went through him. It was not that Draco was unused to receiving presents, Harry was well aware that his soul mate's parents had always spoilt their child, it was that Draco had never expected to be given anything from those at the Burrow. The look on Draco's face was like that of a five year old who had found Father Christmas filling his stocking.

When he was ready to open his hoard Harry really didn't have to read any of the tags on the presents to figure out what gift was from whom: the wrappings gave them away. The one from Hermione and her parents was in neatly stripped paper with one gold stick-on bow holding on the tag; the parcel from Fred and George which was to both himself and Draco was in bright green paper with loud red spots and a large floppy bow; Molly and Arthur's gift was in sedate, modest paper with an ornately tied ribbon holding it closed; the present from the younger Weasley children was in pink paper with a Gryffindor coloured bow and an official looking tag; and lastly Draco's gift to Harry was in silver paper with a carefully tied gold ribbon.

Harry left the present his soul mate had given him to one side for last and started with the one from Hermione and her parents. It was a Muggle book entitled "How to tell if your boyfriend is a mad axe murderer" which caused Harry to laugh out loud, and a charmed bookmark that clung to any page on which it was positioned. He showed the book to his lover and Draco calmly raised both eyebrows and said: "Oh please, I'd never use anything as common as an axe."

Hermione's parents hadn't quite been expecting that reaction, and having heard all about the "awful Draco Malfoy" didn't quite know how to take it until Ron fell off his chair laughing, at which point they joined in. There was more hilarity to be had when Draco showed Harry his present from Hermione and her family. It was also a bookmark and a Muggle book, but the title of this one was "How to cope with the hero in your life: for when they won't commit him". It appeared that the family Granger had well developed senses of humour.

Harry decided on opening the one from Molly and Arthur next. It was soft and squishy and he had no doubt what it was going to be. Tearing into the parcel he found a maroon jumper with a large golden 'H'. He beamed at the couple who had all but adopted him over the years and pulled off the black sweater he was wearing to replace it with the official Weasley jumper. Draco was mirroring Harry's opening cycle and when he held a similar garment in green with a grey D on the front he just sat there and stared at it.

Harry could feel the conflicting emotions that were warring in his soul mate as the significance of the gift hit him. Draco had been cheerful all day, but under it all there had been a current of loss: after all, Draco had never before spent Christmas without his family. Harry had not pushed his lover to talk about it, but Molly's homemade gift had brought it all to the front of Draco's mind and Harry could tell his lover was torn between tears of sadness and tears of joy.

There was no question that Draco would swallow both signs of emotion and pretend everything was completely normal: Harry knew that without a doubt, but just for a moment his soul mate sat on the brink. Eventually he copied Harry and pulled the cashmere sweater he was wearing off and pulled the green jumper on.

"You'll never get rid of me now, Weasley," he said to Ron with a grin and the moment was over.

The parcel from Ron, Ginny and Percy contained sweets and a badge that said: "Call me a mascot again and I'll show you my Wronski Feint". Predictably Draco had a badge too, although he had a small book of charms rather than sweets, and his said "Ex-Death Eater in Training. Don't mention Dark Marks".

When they opened the box from the twins together, under the paper the lid read: Danger, Experimental Products and then had a disclaimer that continued to shrink in letter size and grew in number of words the more Harry looked at it. He assumed it was part of the joke, or at least he hoped it was part of the joke and they weren't about to blow up. Inside were various devices with dubious names that for safety's sake the couple decided to investigate later.

That left only their presents from each other and Harry picked his up reverently. He had an idea of what type of thing it was going to be since they had been shopping together when it was bought and the only way Draco could buy it without Harry finding out what it was, was to tell him to stand in the corner of the shop and think of something else. It was the same technique he had used to buy both Draco's birthday and his Christmas present.

The young man pulled off the ribbon carefully and tucked it in his pocket, then he opened the package with careful precision. He revealed a long thin velvet box which he sat on his knee and considered for a while: when he touched it, the black material seemed to buzz under his fingers. Slowly he opened the case and Harry was captivated: even with his barriers up the slender shaft sitting on more black velvet, glowed.

Harry was aware of Draco's attention on him, but he did not look away from the gift: in fact he lowered his magical barrier slightly to take a better look at the object. It sparkled and danced with colours inside its completely clear surface. It looked like a wand but it was made of crystal.

[What's it for?] Harry asked and moved one finger into the box to touch it carefully.

The moment his skin connected with the crystal, power lanced up his arm and he drew back the digit with a yelp of surprise.

[Wild magic,] Draco said as Harry looked at him, not really understanding, [it's infused with it. It is not just released raw magic: this comes from deep in the earth where no wizard has ever tried to use it. Most people can't cast wild magic it is too unruly for them, but I know in time you will be able to.]

"What you got, Mate?" Ron asked curiously and Harry realised his outburst had made him the centre of attention.

Carefully he turned the box around so his friend could see the crystal wand and passed it towards him for a closer look.

"Oh wow," it was Fred who spoke and the young man's expression was very approving, "is that what I think it is?"

"Depends what you think it is," Draco replied enigmatically.

"A wild wand," the twin replied and leant over Ron's shoulder to look at it in more detail.

"Then yes," Draco replied calmly, "it is what you think it is."

Hermione was almost leaning in her boyfriend's lap to look at the magical item.

"Aren't they supposed to be dangerous?" she asked as she stared at the carved crystal.

Harry would not have been surprised if the answer was yes. Surprisingly it was Molly who spoke up to reply before Draco could.

"Only for those who cannot handle the magic, dear," the woman said and smiled at the young woman before changing to look at Harry, "and I'm sure Harry will be careful."

Harry just nodded as he was handed back the box and he looked at the wand for a few seconds more before closing the case and turning to smile his thanks at his lover.

[I love it,] he said silently, [thank you.]

[Just promise me not to try and use it in our room the first time,] Draco replied with a mischievous smile, [I like that we have walls.]

[Maybe I could try it in Snape's office then,] Harry suggested lightly. [How do you think he'd like me redecorating?]

[Remember how he wanted to poison you because you disrupted his lesson with your allergies?] Draco replied in kind. [Imagine what he'd do if you destroyed his sanctuary.]

The Gryffindor grinned broadly and put his hand on his lover's knee before giving him a quick kiss.

"That's so sweet," the comment came from George and when Harry glanced over the other twin was batting his eyes in a very coy expression.

"George!" his mother admonished quickly and Harry balled up the paper from one of the parcels and threw it at the young man in playful retaliation.

"Ow," the guilty twin complained loudly with a very over the top rubbing of the arm the missile had hit, "that's not fair. You're a hero, Harry, heroes aren't supposed to retaliate."

Harry smiled at him broadly and pointed at Draco.

"I bonded to a Slytherin," he said chattily, "I'm picking up bad habits."

That caused Draco to snort a laugh and pull Harry towards him in a show of solidarity.

"Corruptor of the pure, that's me," he said dramatically, "because we all know Harry never broke a rule before I came along."

That made everyone in the room laugh. After that they went back to present opening and Harry noticed that Draco had only managed to pull the ribbon off his gift, he had not yet opened it. He settled back to watch as his lover meticulously unfolded the paper on the parcel and revealed the box inside. Harry found that he

was incredibly nervous, after such a wonderful present from Draco he wanted his soul mate to like his as much.

Draco opened the box with the same care he had unwrapped it and his face broke into a smile as he saw what was inside. Without hesitating he pulled out the rather ordinary looking quill from its packing and examined it closely. The only thing that made it stand out from a normal writing implement was gold line running from the nib to the tip.

[An Everlast,] Draco said delightedly and turned to Harry. [Thank you, I've always wanted one, but Father said why bother when you can afford as many quills as you'll ever need.]

[I had it enchanted to you as well,] Harry said with a smile, [it will only write for you. It's to go with the book.]

[Not to you as well?] Draco asked.

[I figured with my handwriting, Everlast charms or no Everlast charms, it would break,] Harry replied lightly. [If I ever write in the book I'll use my own quill.]

Draco put the quill back in the box and leant back beside Harry and they both watched the rest of the room silently. Ron had finished unpacking already as well, but was engaged in commenting on how slow Hermione was, and the others were all in various stages. It was a truly lovely atmosphere.

[I'm glad we came,] Draco said eventually and slipped his hand into Harry's, [Apparating or no Apparating.]

[Me too,] Harry replied warmly, [and you haven't seen the food yet.]

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Christmas dinner had almost been grander than a Hogwarts' feast and Harry was one hundred percent sure that even with his over active appetite, he could not eat another thing. The food Molly had produced had been incredible and she had been offering around snacks ever since the meal ended so that everyone was trying to run in the opposite direction if they saw the woman with a tray.

Harry's running ability was completely gone thanks to too much eating and one glass of wine which had travelled straight to his head. It hadn't affected his reasoning or his control of his powers, but he did have a rather overwhelming desire to go to sleep. Hence he was sitting on the sofa, leaning against Draco as his soul mate tag-teamed with Arthur to question the Granger's about all things Muggle.

Non-magical people were not Draco's favourite thing in the world and Harry had a suspicion that they made his lover a little nervous, but since his father had proved once and for all that on certain topics he was less than sane, the Slytherin had taken it upon himself to find out certain things. Hence, when given the opportunity to talk with two 'tame' Muggles (Harry was never telling Hermione what Draco had called her parents) Draco had jumped at the chance. Arthur, loving all things Muggle, had joined in and the Grangers had been stuck talking about everything from the Internet to prit-stick all afternoon.

Harry had joined in the conversation for a little while trying to give Hermione's mother and father some breathing room, but had eventually given up. Mr

Granger appeared to be holding his own by firing questions about wizards back at his two interrogators and Mrs Granger had taken to steering the conversation in alternative directions if she found it completely ridiculous. When he had realised this, Harry had settled down and dozed against his lover, only adding the odd word to the discourse if the topic roused him from his partial slumber.

He was quite pleased with the whole set of events since from the general feeling of Draco and his soul mate's odd silent questions, Harry knew the Slytherin was being quietly surprised. When talking to Mr and Mrs Granger it was obvious where Hermione had gained her intelligence and Draco had gained a genuine respect for the two dentists even if he wasn't sure whether to apply this new attitude to all Muggles or not.

"So a mobile telephone allows you to travel and talk remotely at the same time?" Draco clarified a point about the last topic of conversation.

Harry cracked open an eye and saw Mrs Granger nod and fish in her pocket. Living with his Muggle relatives during the Summer Harry knew what a mobile phone was, Dudley had two, but he had never seen one up close. Such tools of 'normal' people were never allowed to come too close to Harry. As Hermione's mother passed her mobile to Draco so he could have a closer look Harry, couldn't resist taking a peek himself. It was smaller than he thought it would be; the last time he had seen one more than a room away was before Hogwarts, and the technology had obviously improved since then.

"It doesn't work properly with so much magic around," Mrs Granger explained conversationally, "but I couldn't live without it at home."

"It's possible to charm two objects to allow communication between people," Draco said in a very chatty tone as he examined the mobile, "but we tend to rely on other means of communication usually. If we could adapt this idea somehow so it was like the fire network it would be revolutionary."

Harry was sure that the conversation would have launched into discussions of networks and coverage if at that moment Charlie and Bill hadn't walked in from the garden and announced their presence with a small stream of sparks from each of their wands.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," they said with all the theatrics that were usually associated with the twins, "if you would be so gracious as to accompany us outside, we have something you may enjoy."

They were not quite as in time as their identical siblings would have been, but the effect was spectacular none the less.

"No need for coats," Bill said cheerfully as his family and their guests all looked at the brother's quizzically, "we have charmed the spot where you will all be standing."

It took a few moments for the gathering to move into action, but eventually the somewhat confused groups began to move. Harry uncurled from beside Draco and realised that he hadn't chosen the most comfortable position in which to sit as his neck muscles complained. It took a few moments of shifting his shoulder blades carefully to release the tension by which time everyone was on their feet. Dutifully the Weasleys, Grangers, Harry and Draco trouped towards the back door.

[Should we be worried?] Draco asked dryly as they were herded into the back garden.

[If it were Fred and George, I'd say yes,] Harry replied in kind, [with Bill and Charlie I'm not quite sure.]

The snow crunched beneath their feet where it had frozen in the frigid winter temperatures, but Harry found that there was no chill in the air. He let his barriers down slightly and revealed a shimmering, metallic blue haze all around the revellers. It had to be some kind of partitioning spell combined with a warming charm, which was not a simple spell, by any stretch of the imagination. Harry came to the conclusion that a great deal of effort had gone into what was about to occur.

Bill positioned himself on one side of the group and Charlie did the same on the other, at which point they both produced their wands.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Bill said grandly, "we are proud to present, Christmas lights."

"Weasley style," Charlie finished and both brothers flicked their wands.

Suddenly the garden lit up with hundreds of tiny flames and from somewhere music started. The lights were of every different colour under the sun, arranged in complicated patterns and Harry, who still had his barrier to magic at a lower level could see the power it had taken to create the effect overlaid on the whole thing; it was breathtaking. It was so incredible that for a moment the whole group just stood there in awe before finally bursting into a round of applause.

That wasn't it, however, as Harry watched both Bill and Charlie chanted in time to the music, just below proper hearing and the lights began to move. Some of the coloured flames swayed, some danced and some bopped, all in correspondence to part of the classical track that was playing through the cold night air. Unconsciously Harry found himself pulling Draco close, wanting to share the moment with his soul mate completely and he opened his mind so that his lover could see it the same way he could.

It was beautiful; it was breathtaking; it was almost spiritual as the lights and sounds made the night come alive, and it was the most incredible thing Harry had ever experienced. Some of Hogwarts' festivals had had displays equally as vibrant, but this was so personal and made the young man feel such a part of the extended family around him that everything else paled in comparison.

When the lights finally began to fade and the music stilled to nothing, there was a moment of complete stillness and then everyone burst into a round of rapturous celebration. It was quite honestly the most wonderful Christmas Harry could ever remember.

Chapter 25 Of Snowballs and Other Weapons

There was a scream and then an awful lot of shouting. Harry looked at Draco who raised an eyebrow and then they both headed off at speed in the direction of the sound of distress. There was snow all over the ground, but the path they were using appeared well trodden and it had been enchanted to prevent the pupils and staff slipping.

The scream had been quite heart felt and several possible reasons had leapt into Harry's head: the top of the list being another of Voldemort's stunts and, further down, several other life threatening possibilities. What he really did not expect to find as he and Draco rounded the corner were two sets of first years eyeing each other across an almost virgin snowfield. There were five in one group and four in the other and their house scarves gave everything away.

[Gryffindor vs Slytherin,] Harry commented silently as he and his soul mate watched the two sets eye each other.

One of the two girls in the Gryffindor group, Harry thought her name was Emily, was holding the side of her face which appeared somewhat red: there was snow all down the front of her cloak.

"You'll pay for that, Bufo," the girl virtually snarled.

"Really, can't wait to find out how," one of the boys from the Slytherin's shot back.

"I'll hex you into next week," the blond boy standing next to the injured party said bravely; he was a Creevey cousin of some description if Harry remembered rightly.

"Just try it," yet another of the boys from the opposing team returned.

[Why do I have a sense of deja vu?] Harry asked as the two sets of pupils glared at each other.

[Did we look that ridiculous?] Draco replied and he felt amused.

It was then that the first years realised they had an audience. The Gryffindors caught sight of the two seventh years first and, as one, their eyes went round and slightly scared. The Slytherins caught on pretty quickly and all nine faces were soon in Harry and Draco's direction. There was awe in every single expression, even the Gryffindors who were used to having the most famous wizard and his soul mate in their house, but were definitely not used to meeting them around the school.

[Any ideas?] Harry asked as total silence fell.

[We could just leave them to it,] his lover suggested hopefully.

[All I have to say is, second year, snow fight, hospital wing,] he replied and gave Draco a look.

"Everything alright here?" Harry asked aloud, since the silence appeared to be going on forever.

"Fine," one of the Slytherins said instantly, only to be elbowed in the ribs by one of his colleagues.

The pair of seventeen year olds walked calmly over to the younger pupils.

"Really," Draco said evenly, "everything's fine is it? I definitely heard the word hex. Harry didn't you hear it as well?"

Harry put on his most thoughtful expression.

"Could have been," he said conversationally, "but you know me, I've been knocked off my broom and landed on my head one too many times to trust my hearing."

Several of the awed expressions were changing to surprise. Draco drifted towards the Slytherin group as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Just snow," one of the Gryffindors tried this time.

The first years were beginning to believe they might get away with whatever they had been up to, Harry could tell.

"That's not snow," Draco said suddenly and pointed at one of the Slytherins and one of the Gryffindors: two rocks fell to the ground at the same time. "Rocks?" The Slytherin prefect said in his most outraged voice. "Really, where is your house honour? You're wizards, you do not throw rocks: it's undignified."

[You did,] Harry pointed out helpfully while maintaining a completely straight face.

[It had no style then and nothing has changed in the meantime,] Draco replied nonchalantly.

"And not very nice," Harry put in for the Gryffindor's benefit.

Draco bent down gracefully and scooped up a handful of snow, patting it gently into a ball. Then he pulled out his wand.

"Snowball fighting is an ancient art," Draco continued pompously at which point he cast a banishing charm and sent the snow straight at Harry's head.

Harry ducked and the snowball continued its arc, hitting one of the Gryffindor boys in the chest; the first year did not seem to know what to do about that.

"Typical Slytherin," Harry responded as if he had not just dodged a snowball. "It's the pureblood: if it can't be done with a wand they haven't got a clue. I recommend just chucking it."

At which point he raised the snow he had picked up when he ducked and sent it sailing straight at Draco. His lover ducked in exactly the same way Harry had and the missile hit one of the Slytherin boys.

"I really wouldn't let him get away with that you know," Draco said calmly to the astounded looking child.

It took the astonished first year approximately five seconds to realise what the seventh year was implying. Then as one all five Slytherins bent down, picked up

snow and threw it at the Gryffindors. The reprisal came pretty quickly and before very long there was screaming, laughter and lots of very wet pupils with Harry and Draco in the middle of it all, especially when the first years realised that neither of the seventh years were retaliating very hard for hits scored on them. Harry found himself pelted by Slytherin snowballs and his soul mate was being inundated with Gryffindor missiles.

When Harry backed into Draco they both turned and as one dramatically yelled: "Save me." At which point they were pelted from both sides. The first years appeared to have forgotten their battle in the much more fun game of turning the prefects into snowmen. Harry covered his head and fell to his knees.

"I'm done for," he announced and with a great show of over acting collapsed in a heap.

"Argh, I die," Draco added to the drama in what Harry thought was even worse form than his own.

The blond wizard landed next to his soul mate in the snow and Harry cracked open an eye to see what was going on, at which point the first years, as a group, dumped armfuls of snow onto them.

[Vicious little buggers aren't they,] he commented with a laugh.

[I blame the Gryffindors,] was Draco's dry reply.

By the time revenge had been taken and year rather than house honour had been settled the whole group was very, very wet and they were becoming cold. It was when one of the Slytherins began to look a little blue that the two prefects called a halt to the whole proceedings.

"Pax," Harry yelled at the top of his voice and brought the last twitching of the battle to an end, "no one is coming down with hypothermia on my watch."

There were some noises of disappointment from the first years: they seemed to have been enjoying open season on their elders.

[Maybe someone should write a paper on the bonding effects of throwing things, that's twice it's worked,] Draco offered as they picked each other up off the ground.

[I think it's something along the lines of the enemy of my enemy is my friend,] Harry replied, rapidly looking around to make sure they didn't have any damaged pupils.

"You take your lot back to the tower, and I'll deliver my lot to the dungeon," Draco said cheerfully, "we can meet in the prefect's bathroom."

There was some giggling from the Slytherin first years and the Gryffindors appeared a little bemused by it. Harry was trying desperately to remember if he had ever been that innocent: he had a sneaking suspicion he had.

[Are you sure going to the dungeon without backup is a good idea?] Harry asked silently as he rounded up the Gryffindors.

[Slytherins never attack without a plan,] Draco replied lightly, [I'll be fine. I'm not going to stay.]

However, as they marched their respective groups towards the entrance to the castle their plan was interrupted by a tall figure in black. Snape looked at the whole party with a pensive expression.

"Mr Malfoy, Mr Potter, are we auditioning for Snow White?" the head of Slytherin house asked evenly.

Harry kept his mouth shut since although Snape no longer actively attempted to take house points away from Gryffindor if he so much as breathed, their relationship could not exactly be called friendly. Draco on the other hand appeared and felt amused at the Potions master's question.

"No, Sir," he said with a perfectly straight face, "just keeping our hand in at torturing the first years; after all it is one of the perks of being a prefect."

Snape observed them coolly for a few moments and then raised one dark eyebrow.

"Very well, Mr Malfoy," he said evenly without the slightest trace of humour in his expression, "keep up the good work. Just don't let them drip all over the floor."

"We were just taking them back to their common rooms to wring them out," Draco said in a chatty tone.

Snape surveyed the two groups of wet children with a look that caused some of the Gryffindors to shy away. Harry had to admire the man's technique: he knew how to inspire terror.

"I think I shall accompany you, Mr Malfoy," he said evenly, "and witness this 'perk' in action."

Harry would have smiled if it wouldn't have given the game away: Snape really could be useful when he wanted to be. The Slytherin housemaster had just successfully removed any danger to Draco whatsoever and it pleased the Gryffindor no end. Harry was not comfortable with Snape: there was far too much in their past to allow that, but for Draco's sake he was willing to at least try.

[See you later,] Harry said cheerfully, [I'll bring our stuff to the bathroom.]

And with that they went their separate ways: Harry to Gryffindor tower and Draco to the Slytherin dungeon. For his own part the semi-frozen wizard was looking forward to the bit where he and Draco had a chance to warm each other up. By now the other prefects had become used to the idea that their bathroom was off limits for up to a couple of hours from time to time.

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Term was going well: three weeks in and no major incidents on the whole school or the personal front, which Draco hoped was a good sign. It was Saturday and a large percentage of the student population were in Hogsmeade, but for once this didn't include most of the Gryffindor seventh year. They and Draco had spent a restful afternoon in the common room playing various games, doing homework and reading, which, as far as the he was concerned, was a nice change from what he was sure was the universal Gryffindor pastime of finding the nearest trouble and ending up in the middle of it. Only when it was heading on for supper time did he decide that it was time to move.

"Let's go change," Draco said and climbed out of the chair where he had been happily reading next to the warm fire.

Harry looked up from where he was losing a game of chess to Ron with a quizzical expression on his face and Draco couldn't help but tut. His lover was wearing a very old pair of jeans and the Weasley jumper from a couple of Christmases ago, which had two very large holes in it: the T-shirt that was poking out through the holes wasn't much better itself.

"The common room is one thing," Draco said and raised his eyebrows, "but if you expect me to be seen anywhere outside with you, then you are not wearing those rags."

Harry down at himself as he opened his mouth to protest and then shut it again.

"You may have a point," he agreed sheepishly.

Draco saw Hermione hide her grin behind a book and Ron straighten his face as soon as Harry looked back up. Even Harry's best friend had been heard on occasion to admit that Harry sometimes looked as if he dressed from a scrap heap. Draco was slowly going through his lover's wardrobe throwing everything out and replacing them with new clothes, but it was a slow process. If the Slytherin had his way there were only five things he would let Harry keep, but they needed several shopping trips first. His soul mate knocked over his king with a shrug.

"It was inevitable anyway," Harry said with good humour, "we'll be back down when Draco thinks I'm decent."

There were various "see you later"s and the like from several places around the room and Draco led his soul mate towards the stairs.

The shot of disquiet that went through Harry drew Draco to a halt as he reached for the door of their room. There was a look of confusion on Harry's face and it caused mirroring anxiety in him.

[What is it?] he asked, trying to mask the fact that Harry's reaction made him nervous.

For a moment Harry was silent and then he blinked and shook his head as if trying to clear it.

[I don't know,] his soul mate admitted openly, [there's something strange here. It's not evil, it doesn't even feel quite like magic, but it's not normal.]

[Should we call the others?] Draco asked, letting Harry's instincts lead them.

When it came to this sort of thing the only one with the knowledge to decide was Harry. Once upon a time Draco would never have allowed himself to be a follower, but it was only practical sometimes. The Hecatemus frowned and then his expression cleared.

[No,] Harry said firmly, [let's carry on.]

Hand on his wand, just in case, Draco opened the door to their room. He was greeted by the normal empty view that was always there when he walked in. Not

sure if he should be seeing anything or not he moved in cautiously followed closely by Harry. Draco felt his soul mate's distress as soon as it started and he turned to see Harry swaying on his feet. He also saw something else just behind the open door and Draco had his wand pointed in the correct direction instantly. Harry turned unsteadily and the stab of disbelief and shock that went through the Hecatemus took Draco's breath away.

It was more than that though, Draco could tell, and disorientation flooded Harry's system even as Draco moved towards him.

"Sirius," was the one word Harry managed to say before he folded like a house of cards.

Draco tried to catch his soul mate as Harry fell, but he could not stop the fall completely and still keep his wand on the figure half hidden behind the door. Doing his best he sunk down with Harry as his lover swooned, making sure the ailing wizard did not hit the floor too hard, but remaining in eye contact with the intruder. Draco trained his weapon on the figure behind the door as he crouched close to his lover. What was even stranger than the fact that a dead man was standing in their room looking very solid and nothing like a ghost was the fact that the interloper appeared as astonished as Harry had felt.

"Who are you?" Draco demanded angrily since he knew the man couldn't be whom he looked like.

"You can see me?" the intruder totally failed to answer the question and was staring at the Slytherin and his partner as if they were the ones who shouldn't be there.

"Of course I can bloody see you," Draco said, his wand pointed at the man's heart. "Whatever trick you were trying to use, it didn't work. Now who the hell are you?"

The menace in Draco's voice seemed to snap the intruder out of his shock and he looked the protective Slytherin straight in the eye.

"Sirius Black," the man said evenly.

If the situation hadn't been quite so intense Draco would have laughed, as it was, he was more than a little angry and not in the mood for games.

"Try again," he said pointedly, "I recognise the face you're wearing, but Black is dead."

The man half behind the door blinked at him once and then he did something very unexpected.

"I know," the intruder said evenly and stepped right through the oak in front of him.

Draco sat down on the floor with a thump as he momentarily lost his composure. Black did not look like a ghost and he did not feel like a ghost: there was no cold air around him, but the only thing that could go through solid objects like that without very complex magic was a ghost. Too many ideas tried to crowd into Draco's mind at the same time and he could not understand what was going on.

"Ron, Hermione, anyone," he yelled at the top of his voice, knowing that the open door and the spiral stairs would carry his call down to the common room.

The dead man and Draco just stared at each other in silence and there was the sound of running feet on the stairs. Hermione, Ron, Dean and Neville all charged into the room at the same time and came to a grinding halt when they saw him sitting on the floor with Harry out cold next to him. Their eyes followed his wand to where it pointed off to the left and then all came right back.

"Draco, what are you doing?" Hermione asked evenly.

Draco's eyes flicked between the something that claimed to be Sirius Black and the Gryffindors huddled by the door.

"They can't see me," Black said evenly, "until now no one could see me."

"What do you mean they can't see you," Draco demanded of the very solid looking man, "I can see you, why can't they?"

The apparition shrugged unhelpfully, but at least he also looked as unsure as Draco felt.

"Um, who are you talking to, Malfoy?" Ron sounded a little worried.

For a second the Slytherin considered not telling them, but he had no other way to explain what he was doing and he did not want them to just leave.

"Sirius Black," Draco said a little unsure of the reception this information would receive.

Hermione pulled out her wand before anyone could speak: "Phasma Denudo," she said firmly.

A cloud of white smoke launched from the end of her wand and then absolutely nothing happened. She looked at Draco a little confused.

"There are no ghosts here, Draco," she said evenly, "visible or invisible."

"I'm not a ghost," Black supplied the information again.

"Last time I checked dead people who come back are ghosts," Draco did not like being in a position where he did not understand, especially when it had an effect on Harry. "What the hell are you if you're not that?"

Harry's godfather looked at Draco with a slight frown on his face.

"I don't know," the still sold looking man replied, "I'm not connected to a place, I don't float and none of the other ghosts ever know I'm around, but no one can see me, I can't touch anything and I can go between here and the other side. I know I'm dead and I know I'm not a ghost, but that's all."

This was all incredibly confusing and the four Gryffindors were beginning to look at Draco as if he was on something. He was not sure how to handle the situation, but he knew without a doubt that what he was seeing was real.

"He says he's not a ghost," he decided that the best chance of figuring out what was going on was to include Hermione: he didn't care about the rest, but he knew

the brightest student in the school would be able to help if anyone could. "He says he knows he's dead, but that he's not a ghost. No one has seen him before and he can go between here and the other side."

It occurred to Draco that Black was not new at this.

"How long have you been around?" he asked.

He glanced down at his soul mate not sure he wanted Harry to wake up into the mess that was going on, but selfishly wanting the back up anyway. Draco felt as if he was standing on the edge of a very large cliff.

"Since a few months after I died," the man replied evenly, "I'm drawn to Harry. Time isn't the same there as here and I can't stay here for long. I come back when I can and if Harry needs me. This year I came when he bonded with you, but the wards kept me out and I had to go back. I came to Hogsmeade before Christmas: I don't know what happened, but I suddenly found myself there in animagus form. I heard some Slytherins talking about Harry and went to investigate and when I came back you'd all gone."

Draco's mind put the pieces together.

"You were the black dog Harry saw in Hogsmeade," he said as he worked it out. "It wasn't just the shock of seeing something that reminded him of you is was actually you, and your presence does something to him. You're causing an overload," Draco's instincts led him as he reasoned what was going on, "he's never blocked out anything like you before."

The thoughts were tumbling through his mind so fast that he almost forgot he wasn't alone. When he looked at the four Gryffindors Ron and Dean were looking at him as if he was mad and Hermione and Neville appeared torn.

"Go with me here," Draco said slowly, "please. What if because of the way Black died he's not quite normally dead?"

That didn't come out as eloquently as he had planned, but he ploughed on anyway.

"He went through the veil, right," Draco dragged up the memories Harry had shown him, "he bodily disappeared. What if that changes the energy he has? Harry is sensitive to energy so it is plausible that he'd be able to see whatever Black is. That begs the question why in Merlin's name can I see him, but I'm making this up as I go along so there are bound to be some kinks in the plan."

What made Draco feel a little better was that Hermione at least was no longer looking unconvinced; in fact she had the thoughtful frown on her face that the Slytherin recognised as her trying to remember something she had read somewhere.

"Bluebottle," she said suddenly, "Primrose Bluebottle, Hecatema, lived from 713 AD to 1053 AD. Most of her writings have been lost, but there is one partial that lays out a theory about a curse that kills by transfiguring a victim into pure energy and then transferring them to the other side. She theorised that they would be dead but something more as well. The details of the curse and most of her ideas are gone, but there is a scribbled note about meeting a victim of the spell."

The young woman appeared jubilant and then the full weight of her words hit her and she stared at the space where Draco had been pointing his wand.

"Oh my god," Hermione said pointedly, "Sirius is really here isn't he."

Black was looking at the head girl as if she was the most miraculous thing in the universe and Draco could tell the man wanted to ask questions. However, even as he opened his mouth a strange look crossed his face.

"I have to go," he said suddenly, "I've been here too long: I was checking things out for a couple of hours before you saw me."

He spoke to Draco directly, and before the blond youth's eyes the solid man began to fade.

"Tell Harry I love him and I'm sorry," Black said and his voice sounded distant. "I'll come back when I can."

"Sorry about what?" Draco asked, not sure what the man meant.

The apparition's lips moved, but there was no sound and suddenly Harry's godfather was gone completely. Draco just sat there for a moment in stunned silence: this was all a little too much for one afternoon.

"He's gone," he said quietly, "been here too long."

A groan from Harry interrupted him and a flood of confusion and distress hit him from his soul mate. Draco looked up at the others quickly.

"Please go," he said rapidly, "he won't be able to deal with you all as well. We'll talk later."

Hermione nodded at him and Draco was infinitely pleased to have one ally among the four Gryffindors. The other three appeared confused and undecided, but the head girl hustled them out of the door as quickly as she could. Then Hermione reached back behind her, made eye contact with Draco one more time and then closed the door. The lock clicked shut just as Harry opened his eyes.

[Draco?] his soul mate's mental voice sounded confused and afraid. [Sirius?]

[I saw him too,] Draco said calmly, looking into Harry's very green eyes.

Loss, pain, disbelief, hope and guilt hit Draco all at once as the emotions welled up in Harry. Gathering his trembling lover into his arms he pulled his soul mate close and tried to fight some of the pain he felt in his bond mate with the caring and love inside him.

[He's dead,] Harry was at a loss to know what had happened and he expressed his confusion as Draco held him, [but he didn't look dead.]

There was the flare of hope again and then the overwhelming guilt that took it all away.

[Yes he's dead,] Draco knew it would hurt Harry to hear the truth, but it would only hurt more if the dark haired youth let the hope grow. [He can come back, but he's not a ghost. He overloaded your senses, he didn't know you could see

him, and then he had to go back. He asked me to tell you he loves you and he's sorry.]

Harry's confused mind latched on to the last thing Draco told him like a drowning swimmer: it hurt to feel his lover so lost and Draco tried desperately to make the pain go away.

[Sorry for what?] Harry asked still trembling in the Draco's arms.

[I don't know,] he replied honestly, [he tried to tell me, but he faded out. He said he would come back.]

Harry's thoughts were silent for a while, but the torrent of emotions continued. They were so muddled that Draco found them disorientating and all he could do was hang on. Seeing Sirius had brought back all the doubt and grief that Harry had tried to put behind him: Draco was not sure the man's spirit presence had been a good thing.

[Does he,] Harry started to ask something but hesitated and there was fear in his inner voice, [does he blame me?]

The question caught Draco off guard and he looked down as his soul mate not understanding. There was so much anguish in Harry's face that it made the him ache.

[Blame you for what, Harry?] the question fell from the youth's inner voice just as he suddenly realised what his soul mate was asking. [Oh, Harry,] he said, understanding and throwing every feeling of comfort he could find at his lover, [Sirius' death wasn't your fault. Of course he doesn't blame you, he loves you: he comes back to make sure you're all right.]

[Then why haven't I seen him before?] Harry's question was desperate.

[Your power gives you the ability to see him,] Draco said soothingly, brushing the hair away from his soul mate's face as he looked into his eyes. [You saw him in Hogsmeade. Before we bonded no one could see him, he didn't know anyone could until today. He can't be here always, but he comes when he can because he loves you.]

Knowing that Harry needed as much as Draco could give him he opened his memory and poured out everything he had seen and heard. He showed his soul mate every image of the youth's godfather he had and he held Harry as he took it all in.

There were no tears, just the trembling and the torrent of emotions. It was incredible and terrible to see at the same time: the internal chaos and the outside control that was Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived did not cry, but his pain was almost unbearable.

"Let it out, Harry," Draco virtually begged, "please let it out."

"I can't," his soul mate said quietly, "it won't go."

They didn't speak again, not for a long time and Draco held Harry until the shaking stopped. Even then they didn't move: for a while he thought that maybe the universe had come to a grinding halt.

Chapter 26 Discussions

It was three hours before Harry could do more than sit staring at the wall. He had seen Sirius; it was all he had hoped for and so much worse as well. The guilt of falling for Voldemort's plan and causing his godfather's death had all but disappeared he had bonded with Draco: there had been far too many other things to deal with to think about the past. Yet seeing Sirius had brought it all back and he had been consumed by the need to atone, by the sense of being helpless to do anything, and then there was the fear. Harry had seen his godfather's dark side and he knew that Sirius Black was a passionate man, and he had found himself terrified that the man would hate him for being so weak in succumbing to Voldemort's scheme.

Even the memories Draco had shown him couldn't shake that fear, and it had settled in the pit of Harry's stomach, clawing away at his gut. It was like a pain that was eating away at him and nothing could kill it: in the end Draco had given up trying. When he had been able to move properly, Draco had picked them both off the floor and lead Harry to the bed. Harry had sat down on the edge and his soul mate had climbed on behind him, wrapping his arms around him lovingly. They had been sitting that way for nearly two and a half hours as Harry let the thoughts and emotions flow through him without hindrance. Draco had not interrupted once and Harry knew his soul mate was feeling everything as well.

"Hermione will have looked up that reference by now," Harry said eventually and found that his voice was steadier than he expected.

Draco had shared the whole time Harry had been unconscious with him and so he was aware of everything that had been said.

"We should go and see what she has found out," he continued slowly.

"That can wait until the morning," Draco told him quietly, "you need to sleep."

As usual Draco was thinking of Harry's health and he was sure that the Slytherin needed sleep as much as he did. There was shock and confusion in Draco as well as himself and Harry knew he was the cause, but he couldn't shield his lover from this, it was totally out of his control.

"I don't think I can sleep yet," he admitted, "and they'll be worried. We should go down."

For a few moments Draco did not release the grip he had on Harry, but eventually he drew back. With a sigh Harry stood up, ignoring the complaints from his stiff legs, and turned, offering his hand to his soul mate. For a few seconds Draco looked up at him, the pain in his grey eyes obvious even if Harry hadn't been able to feel it first hand. They had shared pain before, but this was raw and it was difficult for both of them: not for the first time Harry was indescribably grateful for his soul mate.

[I love you,] it seemed to be the only sentiment for what Harry felt at that moment and, as he reaffirmed it, the ache inside him dimmed a little.

When Draco reached out and took his hand the ache reduced a little more.

[I love you too,] his soul mate's voice sounded in his mind and the ache was suddenly bearable.

They walked down the stairs slowly without further comment, hand in hand, united against the universe. There were a few looks in their direction from the members of the house who had not been in the room, but Harry had the distinct impression none of the reasoning behind the incident had been revealed.

"Feeling better, Mate?" Ron asked as if he was asking about something purely routine. "You know you shouldn't scare Malfoy like that; how would we explain his heart attack to Snape?"

Once again Harry was reminded what good friends he had as Ron, Hermione and Neville all calmly deflected the scrutiny of the rest of the house by pretending that he had just had a break down of some kind. Since this was an event which happened from time to time it was no longer news to Gryffindor. However, Harry also could not help noticing the large, dusty tome sitting on Hermione's knee.

"We didn't tell anyone," Neville said a little nervously as the soul mates joined their three friends.

Typical Longbottom reaction to reassure his companions in the most direct way possible, if Harry hadn't been feeling quite so mentally battered he might have smiled.

"Thank you," he replied quietly, "I don't think I could deal with anyone else knowing."

A rather conflicted look passed across Hermione's features and Harry knew what she was thinking and couldn't blame her.

"Harry," she said rather hesitantly, "I think you should at least tell one of the staff. This could be important: it affected you badly."

Harry did not want to tell anyone, he would rather have dealt with this situation with only himself and Draco involved, but it was difficult not to see Hermione's point. The urge to shout her down and tell her to mind her own business reared suddenly into his mind, but Draco's calming presence prevented Harry from saying anything he would regret. He looked at his lover and took a deep breath before nodding.

"Dumbledore," he said after a moment, "we'll tell Dumbledore."

Hermione appeared incredibly relieved.

"But no one else," Harry went on with a pleading note in his voice, "please, not until we have it figured out."

The other three Gryffindors all looked at each other and then as one nodded firmly. For that Harry managed a small smile of gratitude.

"I found the reference," Hermione spoke again after a moment and handed Draco the book she was holding. "It's not much, but it proves that there may be a logical explanation for," she almost said Sirius, but visibly changed her mind and replaced it with, "what happened."

Harry did not bother to read over his lover's shoulder as Draco's eyes wandered down the page to where his friend indicated.

"We should get this to Hilde," Draco said after a few moments, "she may have more information."

The last thing Harry wanted was another person in on the whole incident, but his soul mate's tone was very firm and he did not have the strength to argue. It would probably be for the best even if the idea of each new person knowing did horrify Harry. He was not thinking straight and he knew it, so he acquiesced with a slight nod.

"We'll figure it out, Harry," Ron said with his usual optimism, "don't you worry."

Several cutting replies came to his mind, but he squashed them and instead gave his friend a bland smile. This was not their fault and he would not take it out on them, but he couldn't help hoping that he and Draco could get away soon.

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Harry sat down in the offered chair and Draco perched on the arm of the comfortable piece of furniture never letting contact with his soul mate drop. The real world was still vaguely dim in Harry's perspective as his mind worked on the evening's events and processed everything else rather automatically.

"Something has happened, has it not, Harry?" Dumbledore's calm tones broke through the young man's contemplations and he looked up into the headmaster's unusually serious, blue eyes.

Harry nodded silently and tried to come up with the right way to begin. Draco remained beside him, a quiet, constant source of strength, but did not move to speak in his place, knowing that he needed to be the one to do this.

"Sirius isn't as gone as we thought," Harry said eventually, his voice quiet, almost to the point of a whisper. "We saw him earlier."

Dumbledore's features remained calm, but there was a momentary flash of concern and confusion in the normally twinkling eyes. Harry did not have the mental energy to empathise.

"Would you care to explain your last statement, My Boy?" the headmaster asked as the silence drew out.

"He's still dead," Harry said, unable to keep the pain out of his voice, "but he can come back. He's not a ghost."

He knew there was more he could say, but he really didn't know how to say it. This was too big and his mind had not yet fully come to grips with it so that he could process it properly. Perhaps in the morning things would be a little clearer, but as it was, Harry could not deal with the situation. Draco rubbed the back of his lover's hand supportively and all Harry could do was watch as Dumbledore turned his attention to the Slytherin.

"It wasn't a hallucination," Draco told the headmaster evenly, "and I saw it as well, with my own eyes, not through Harry's. Sirius Black was in our room earlier this evening, I spoke to him."

Just for a moment Professor Dumbledore appeared shocked before his usual, 'I am omnipotent' expression was back in place.

"Where, may I ask, is Sirius now?" the headmaster asked in a remarkably calm tone.

"He can only stay for a certain amount of time," Harry explained quietly, needing to distract his thoughts from the circular pattern they had taken up. "He moved between here and the other side."

Dumbledore was contemplating his fingers, which were arched in front of him as he sat back in his chair. It was a pose Harry had seen before and usually meant the headmaster was deep in thought. It was a faint comfort to know that the situation affected Dumbledore so deeply.

"It was the veil," Harry found himself saying with sudden anger in his voice, "it is an abomination."

The heat of emotion that ran through his body rather shocked him as days of recrimination converged in that one thought. His tone caused Professor Dumbledore to look at him once more and the headmaster's expression was very serious.

"If you can, Harry," the old wizard said evenly, "take comfort in the fact that you are not the only one to hold that opinion."

That reply managed to completely wipe away the anger that threatened to build in Harry and left him at a loss. He had not expected a simple agreement.

"I do not doubt you, My Boy," Dumbledore said resolutely. "I cannot claim to have been aware of the consequences of Sirius' means of departure from this life, but, now they have been revealed, certain theories to which I am privy are confirmed. Hecatemae have never been connected with the ideas of which I speak, but it is logical to assume an individual such as yourself would be sensitive to such changes in energy."

Harry really didn't know how to react to that.

"Which leaves us with many choices as to how to proceed," the headmaster continued in a slightly less serious tone. "There are those who would be heartened by this news."

That sent a wave of irrational panic through Harry as he realised exactly who Dumbledore was talking about. Draco's fingers entwined through his own and gripped firmly as a feeling of support and strength travelled through their bond.

"I do not think it would be wise to alert anyone of this development until we are certain of what it means," Draco said in a tone that begged no argument. "Alerting Professor Lupin or anyone else associated with Sirius could cause more pain than it would relieve."

Harry heard the unspoken 'and you'll do it over my dead body' which was at least some comfort. If Remus became involved in this Harry knew he would not be able to hold it together. There was only so much emotional stress he could take at one time and dealing with how the last of the Marauders would react to Sirius not being completely gone was something that filled him with dread. Maybe once they'd figured out what the hell was going on and how to cope with it he might be open to the idea.

Dumbledore did not argue; he nodded.

"As you wish," the headmaster said calmly. "Now I suggest we take some tea and then if it is not too much of a strain on either of you, I would request that you tell me as much about what occurred today as you feel able to."

Harry felt tired and emotionally drained as he sat back in his chair and watched Professor Dumbledore summon his normal teapot. He did not know how much more he could take that evening, and the pressure was beginning to give Draco a rather scary look around the eyes, but the headmaster had a right to know since they had brought the problem to him. The world would not come into sharp focus except at moments of alarm like when the headmaster had suggested others be brought in on the situation, and Harry let himself drift until he was handed a cup and saucer.

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Hilde was already waiting for them on the Monday evening as they arrived for their weekly session. The normality of Sunday and their lessons throughout the day had helped Harry to return the subject of his godfather into proportion with the rest of his life, but he was by no means easy with the whole incident. He was very glad that only a few people knew the truth, because their sympathetic looks and reassuring smiles were hard enough to deal with. If the whole school had known, Harry was pretty sure he would have lost it.

As it was he was anxious about meeting with Hilde since he didn't know how she would have reacted to the message Draco had sent the Saturday evening. She gave Harry and Draco a smile as they came in, but it lacked some of her usual enthusiasm.

"Hello," the woman greeted warmly, "please have a seat."

"Good evening," Draco replied, politely.

"Hi," was all Harry could manage.

As usual there was butterbeer on the table, but neither of the soul mates felt like helping themselves and they sat down quietly side by side. Seeming to sense their mood Hilde looked somewhat apologetic.

"I'm sorry," she began openly, "I spent all of yesterday in the archives, but Primrose Bluebottle is one of the Hecatemae for whom we have very little information. I found the same reference you sent me and your source is completely accurate, it was not missing anything."

It was not the news Harry had been hoping for and he rubbed his temples trying to distract himself from the dejection he was feeling. Draco, who was handling the situation far better than he was, was not ready to give up, however.

"Was there anything that could help us at all?" Draco asked calmly while stroking Harry's finger's gently in a calming motion.

"There is no information about the particular situation you described," Hilde replied evenly. "I suspect it is not a common phenomenon. However, I took the liberty of investigating anything that caused a similar reaction in any of those before you, Harry. I believe we can help you to cope with the overwhelming nature of the experience so that should it happen again it will not cause an overload."

Harry grabbed hold of the news like a lifeline; it was the first good thing he could recall about the whole situation. At least if he could control how he reacted if Sirius returned he could talk to him. Passing out at his godfather's feet was not a useful response to the circumstances.

"How?" he asked, eager to focus on anything positive.

Draco had also sat forward in his chair and Harry could feel curiosity as strong as his own running through his lover. With a course of action to take neither felt as helpless as the last couple of days had left them.

"The first step is to help you recall the whole experience from your additional senses' point of view," Hilde said, the usual note of enthusiasm vaguely returning to her voice as she noted her companion's interest. "It's similar to Muggle hypnotism, but a little more complicated and will mostly be down to you, Draco. With the memories clear, the pair of you will then be able to examine the reasons for the overload and come up with a mental barrier similar to those Harry already uses."

It sounded a little vague to Harry, but then most things to do with his condition were; if there was one thing he had learned it was that there were no hard and fast rules.

"Detailed in the extreme as usual," Draco said, raising his eyebrows, but his tone was contemplative rather than scathing which meant he was already formulating a plan of action.

Hilde smiled at the comment; she was used to Draco's unique way of expressing himself by now.

"Please teach me," Harry said, for the first time since the incident, some semblance of his normal self in his voice.

This situation was by no means solved, but at least now the young wizard had hope that there could be some semblance of resolution.

Chapter 27 The Ways of Slytherins

No matter how many times Harry tried to explain that it made no difference if Draco watched the team practices or was on the other side of the school, the fact that his lover still cheered for Slytherin at matches made the Gryffindor team nervous if he stayed around the pitch. The fact that Harry and Draco talked tactics all the time, often while he coached his house team, did not seem to have factored in to his house mates' mental attitude. Hence when Gryffindor practiced, Draco usually made himself scarce.

Harry was sitting on the Firebolt, which Draco had picked up in his sixth year, above the game that the main house team and the reserve team were playing, watching for any obvious mistakes. To some it might have seemed odd that Harry was sitting on a borrowed broom while the Gryffindor seeker used his, but in The Boy Who Lived's mixed up world it made perfect sense.

[Ashfield is really beginning to play well,] Harry commented to his soul mate thoughtfully, [next year he'll make a good beater.]

[You can train even the slowest dog to do tricks eventually,] Draco replied dryly.

Draco had not been in a good mood all day and it was showing in his acid tongue. Being friends with Hermione for six years Harry was well aware that girls had days of the month when you just smiled and kept your head down if you wanted to keep it; having shared his life with Draco for months Harry had come to realise that some males cycled as well. When his lover was brooding Harry had learned to ignore what he said and rely on what Draco was feeling instead: hence he did not rise to the bait. Instead he kept one eye on the game and changed the subject.

[Did you find the information you were looking for in the library?] Harry asked lightly.

[Actually I did,] Draco replied, his tone changing completely as the topic of conversation moved on to the only thing he seemed interested in today. [Snape's a sly old dog: he left the clues all over the notes from Monday's lesson. The key ingredient is wormwood...]

Draco stopped talking very suddenly and Harry felt a momentary spike of alarm. It was not a feeling that sent Harry shooting off at speed to rescue his lover from whatever was going on, but it was enough to make him lose all interest in the Quidditch practice and concentrate solely on Draco.

Since Christmas the pair had been experimenting with what Hilde referred to as 'rapport'. They had been able to send each other images, thoughts and emotions from the outset, but rapport was a little more than that: it was the melding of minds. Harry and Draco had achieved it many times when in physical contact; then it came naturally, but according to Hilde and their other sources it was possible when they were apart as well. So far they had not been completely successful, except once when Harry had tripped over his own robes and fallen head long over the common room sofa and Draco had found himself looking out of his soul mate's eyes when he was actually upstairs in their room. They could manage sound okay so one or the other could eavesdrop in the other's head if they let them, but vision was not as easy.

Turning his awareness inwards Harry gently nudged Draco's mind to let him in and then he was listening to whatever was going on around his soul mate.

"Goyle, Crabbe, Zabini, Pansy," Harry heard Draco say evenly, "this is a surprise."

"What, no Gryffindors to protect poor little Draco?" Pansy replied with a tone to her voice that Harry did not like at all.

From the feelings coming from Draco he did not appear impressed with her opening gambit.

"Let's not pretend," his soul mate said pointedly, "you know I am alone or you would not be here. What is it going to be: straight down to business or are we actually going to talk first?"

Draco's voice was completely without fear, but on the inside he was feeling at least a little anxious. Harry dragged his awareness back to his own body while trying to keep the connection open and then he flew as fast as he dared towards his soul mate.

"You're a traitor, Malfoy," it was Blaise Zabini who spoke this time, a hard, nasty edge to his voice, "you betrayed your friends and the Dark Lord."

"Oh please," Draco snapped back almost straight away, "you have no idea what you're talking about."

When Harry reached the castle he hopped off the broom and ran full speed towards the corridor outside the library.

"You abandoned everything for Potter," Zabini spat and Harry was pretty sure the Slytherins viewed his name as a swear word.

For the first time since the conversation began Harry felt his lover become angry.

"My 'betrayal' had nothing to do with Harry," Draco said vehemently, "what we have become is a consequence of what I chose to do. I changed sides before I was ever involved with The Boy Who Lived."

There was a moment of smug satisfaction from Draco and Harry had to assume that his words had at least surprised the other Slytherins.

"Why?" the question came from Goyle, which surprised Harry, but not apparently Draco. "Why did you turn traitor?"

"Have you ever met him?" Draco asked evenly. "Have any of you ever laid eyes on Voldemort?"

The other four pupils must have given Draco a visual signal to the negative because he continued.

"Well I have," he said firmly. "My father decided that I should meet him last Summer. He's a complete madman: Voldemort may be the most powerful wizard this side of the moon, but he's a raving lunatic. His fearless Death Eaters whimper at his side because they're terrified of him. There is no great cause for wizardkind: there's a psycho who's so wrapped up in his need to kill Harry Potter that he can't even see anything else, and his band of lackeys who don't have the guts to put him out of his misery."

Harry took the last corner slowly and quietly, entering the corridor behind the four Slytherins and drawing his wand carefully. He could see Draco standing beyond the other pupils, but Draco gave no outward acknowledgement of having seen him. Each Slytherin had their wand in their hand.

[If necessary I'll take Pansy and Goyle,] Draco's voice said in Harry's mind, [you take Zabini and Crabbe.]

[What do you mean if necessary?] Harry asked incredulously.

[Miracles have happened,] was his lover's flippant response.

"The Dark Lord is a great wizard," Pansy said, but her voice held just a trace of uncertainty.

These were children acting on the beliefs of their parents, Draco was acting on his own behalf and they all knew it. Harry doubted it would avert the coming fight, but at least it might make them think about what they were doing.

"He might have been once," Draco said evenly, "but now he's nothing more than a madman out for revenge."

"Enough with the speeches," Zabini said coldly, "you're going to get what's coming to you, Malfoy."

Harry didn't need any other encouragement: as Draco surprised his opponents by dropping the books he was carrying, ducking and rolling Harry raised his wand and uttered the word: "Expelliarmus." Blaise's wand went flying out of his hand and the Slytherin flew sideways. Harry did not pause to consider that he might have put a little too much force behind the spell.

"Stupefacto," he aimed at Crabbe this time and the boy keeled over with a surprised look on his face.

When Harry glanced at his lover, Draco had fared equally as well. From the aftermath it looked as if he'd hit Goyle with a full body bind and Pansy with a silencing charm. The girl was trying to cast, but without a voice she was incapable of doing anything. Harry kept his eye on Zabini who was sitting on the ground looking dazed and walked over to where Draco was picking himself up off the floor.

"You okay?" Harry asked out of habit rather than because he needed to know.

He could feel that Draco was fine, but a little bit of verbal reassurance never hurt anyone.

"Perfectly, thank you," his soul mate said shortly, glaring at Pansy, "my old friends don't seem to be up on their duelling skills."

"What do you want to do with them?" was Harry's next question as he viewed the devastation carefully.

He could have asked silently, but he rather enjoyed the effect his question had on the impotent Slytherins who were still conscious.

"Leave them," Draco said evenly, "you need to get back to practice and I have better things to do."

On the inside Draco was still excited from the fight, but on the outside he appeared icy calm. Harry never quite knew how his lover managed it: it was a skill he had not managed to master even after years with the Dursleys. He was unsure about just letting the Slytherins get away with their ambush, but this was Draco's fight and Harry did not want to interfere with whatever game his lover was playing. Strategy against his former friends was Draco's speciality and Harry chose to stay out of it.

"Okay," he agreed aloud. [You will explain what you're up to later, won't you?] he asked silently.

[Of course,] his lover replied.

"Have a little think about what I said," Draco said to his housemates as he picked his books up off the floor while Harry kept his wand on the others. "You might not believe me, but just take a look yourselves and you'll see what I mean."

Then as a pair Harry and Draco walked away, leaving the Slytherins to sort themselves out.

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Harry sitting in the corner of the common room with the Prisma in front of him, creating the most spectacular patterns and colours in the air, had become, although not an everyday, definitely not a completely unusual sight. For a little while the Prisma had been a phenomenon amongst the Gryffindors and everyone had wanted a try, but then Christmas had happened and the fad had worn off. There were still a couple who were actually trying to improve and Harry had taken to giving little tutorials when he could, but mostly the Hecatemus was viewed from a distance.

With Harry safely ensconced among his housemates, Draco would often use the time to go to the library or complete any tasks that did not involve his soul mate, as so much of his life did these days. However, in the two months since Christmas, Hilde had been encouraging Harry to try other things than simply focusing his mind on the Prisma, and in their latest session she had shown him a meditation technique that took him even deeper into his mind.

The new exercises often involved Draco in a role to balance his lover, but for this one he was more of a guard than a participant. If Harry went in too deep he was there to pull him out, and so on the last Saturday in February the afternoon found both of the soul mate's in Harry's usual corner with the Hecatemus concentrating on his mental exercises and Draco with his nose in a book.

Harry had been at it for nearly half an hour and Draco had so far felt nothing untoward about the whole experience, and had taken to keeping a vague mental eye on his lover and most of his mind on reading. Harry was completely focused on his task and Draco could feel his soul mate's thoughts at a distance, almost as if Harry was sleeping. It was a peaceful sensation and the Prisma was floating in front of Harry, spinning slowly and giving out soft greens and blues as if echoing the remoteness of the Gryffindor's mind. Draco was also keeping half an eye on the patterns the device was producing in case he spotted anything untoward.

It would soon be time to pull Harry out of his meditations anyway since they had an appointment at four o'clock. Usually Harry would come out of the exercise by himself when he was ready, but today Dumbledore had invited them to tea so

Harry did not have that luxury. The headmaster liked to have a rather fatherly chat with the couple every now and then and invitations to take tea in his office would turn up every now and then at random intervals. At one time these would have annoyed the magic out of Draco, but these days he found Dumbledore's rather eccentric outlook on life somewhat amusing and quite endearing; not that he would ever tell anyone that of course.

Draco was just considering how long it would take him to bring Harry back this time since Harry was obviously in very deep, when he felt something change. For a moment it felt incredibly peaceful and a sense of complete calm ran through him, but then it changed. From gently floating thoughts came sudden stillness almost as if time had ground to a halt and Draco dropped his book as his mind was dragged towards the same point. Not willing to give up control Draco wrenched back his thoughts as hard as he could and then threw everything he had at reaching Harry.

It was like his soul mate was there, but not there. Draco's mental communication went unanswered and although their bond was still very much in evidence it was as if Harry's mind had removed itself from any conscious movement. The sensation caused shots of panic to race through Draco and he was out of his seat so fast that it caused every person in the room to look in his direction.

"[Harry,]" Draco spoke with his mind and his voice unable to keep the panic out of his tone.

He had not been prepared for this and he desperately wanted Harry to answer him. Even if he made a complete idiot out of himself, if it brought his lover back from wherever his mind had gone, as far as Draco was concerned it was worth it. What made it worse was the Prisma; it was still hovering between Harry's outstretched hands, but it was perfectly still, the coloured patterns it had been creating frozen in place like a moment of time caught as an image.

Before Draco could reach out to his lover Harry began to speak, and to his ears if barely sounded like Harry at all.

"The Dark Lieutenant is in disgrace," the Gryffindor intoned, his voice strangely husky and much lower than his normal register. "He will seek his master's favour through his child. The father shall meet his doom or the child will be sacrificed."

The words froze Draco in place and for a moment he could not move a muscle until as suddenly at it began it was over and Harry blinked. The Prisma fall back into its box and the colours vanished from around it leaving it inert and lifeless. Harry groaned and his hand went to his head as he looked at Draco rather blankly.

"Harry," Draco slowly, incredibly relieved to have his soul mate's thoughts running through his mind normally once more, "Are you all right?"

It was really a stupid question, since Draco could feel that his lover was not all right, but he found himself in need of saying something.

"Headache," Harry said a little absently while rubbing his forehead, "what happened?"

It was then that Draco remembered they were far from alone and his Slytherin instincts kicked in. Harry's voice had been quiet enough that he doubted much could have been heard and he did not want this going any further.

[Not here,] the blond wizard said silently, [we need to see Dumbledore and I'll explain as we go.]

"You decided to quote poetry," Draco said, giving his best impression of someone slightly concerned but also vaguely amused. "I think perhaps we shouldn't let you into your subconscious too often, it seems to be a very peculiar place. We're supposed to be in the headmaster's office in fifteen minutes, so just enough time to get you a headache cure and make it on time."

Harry still appeared rather dazed, but nodded and followed his lover's lead. Closing the box Harry climbed to his feet, at which point Draco slipped a hand under his soul mate's arm and swiftly lead him towards their room. Harry was obviously confused by the whole situation, but he allowed Draco to take the lead up until the point where he had him alone and summoned a glass of water to dilute the headache potion Harry habitually carried with him these days.

[What happened?] Harry asked firmly as he placed two drops of the potion in the water and waited for the solution to settle down.

The means of communication was deliberate and conveyed that Harry was not about to allow Draco to avoid the subject any longer.

"I think you just produced a prophecy," he said eventually and looked his lover in the eye. "And I think it was about me."

The way the words Harry had spoken stuck in his mind, Draco had no doubt that his soul mate had made a prediction, and it was all too obvious who it was about.

"What did I say?" Harry asked urgently.

Draco had been expecting the question and instead of repeating the words he shared the whole experience from his point of view. In response Harry sat down on the bed a stunned expression on his face to match his feelings.

"Dumbledore," the Hecatemus said eventually, "you were right, we need to see Dumbledore."

Draco nodded and hoped fervently that the headmaster would have a logical explanation for this one.

Chapter 28 Divination

Harry climbed up the ladder into Professor Trelawney's loft dreading the whole appointment. Okay, he had had a vision, but that didn't mean he wanted to ever have to share it with Professor Trelawney or her Sunday afternoon group of Divination sycophants. Why Dumbledore had insisted that he go he could not fathom, Harry was of the opinion that Firenze with his mystical vagueness would be more use than the batty woman who continued to predict his death. The only good thing was that Draco had agreed to go with him and hence his soul mate was right behind him.

"Harry, My Dear Boy," Professor Trelawney's voice greeted him almost before he was through the trapdoor, "welcome back to my domain, and Draco. How lovely it is to see you both now you have realised your destiny."

Harry shuddered inside, but gave the professor a weak smile.

[She hasn't changed I see,] Draco said dryly. [What possessed Dumbledore to suggest this?]

[He saw it in my stars,] Harry replied sarcastically.

"Come, Gentlemen, come," the woman was still going, "I have a place for you here. Your connection to the universe can only increase the flow of the energies in the room."

[I was wrong,] Draco commented at that, [she's worse.]

Harry did not bother replying and walked through the incense-laden room to the seats Professor Trelawney indicated: over the years he had come to the conclusion there was no point in fighting these things. As he glanced around the room the members of the group were not a surprise that was except for one: Neville Longbottom.

[Did you know Longbottom was in this group?] Draco sounded and felt as equally surprised as Harry at the sight of his ex-dorm mate.

[Didn't have a clue,] he replied quickly, [and I thought he failed the O.W.L. as badly as I did.]

[Well I've always said there's no accounting for Longbottom,] his soul mate replied dryly, [no matter how many wards you put between him and a cauldron.]

"I see danger in your future," the teacher pronounced as Harry and Draco sat down, interrupting their conversation, "but together you will stand against it."

[Well that's a new one,] Harry said, quite surprised, [even when I forget to avoid her in the hallways I'm going to die in one of any number of horrible ways. She obviously likes you.]

[Nope,] Draco said lightly, [she's just an incurable romantic. You used to be the lone hero who had to die to save the world; now you're one of the star-crossed lovers who has found his love against all the odds. Next week we'll probably be the tragic couple doomed to be separated and then you'll start dying again.]

Harry had never thought of it quite like that before and he had to admit that it made sense. He decided to enjoy the not dying part while it lasted.

"We have just turned our inner eyes to the power of crystals and especially crystal balls," the professor pronounced grandly. "I understand from the Headmaster that you were using a similar device when you were blessed with a vision, Harry."

Harry tried hard not to grimace: he wouldn't have called it being blessed; cursed sounded more like it to him.

"Um, yes," he said quietly, "it's called a Prisma, I use it for meditating."

Dumbledore had instructed him to take the device with him to the class so Harry pulled the box out of his pocket and placed it on the table.

"Fabulous," Professor Trelawney announced brightly, "I would be extremely pleased if at the end of today's session you would give us a demonstration. But first I think it would be prudent for us all to focus our energies. There is a crystal ball for each of you and I want you to let your inner eyes open onto the other realm."

Draco lent back in his chair as Harry looked at him and his soul mate indicated the crystal ball on the table: it was obvious who would be doing the work for this afternoon. Harry sighed and looked back at the Divination mistress hoping that this wouldn't go on too long.

Feeling curious never-the-less, as Professor Trelawney demonstrated her technique over her crystal ball Harry let his barriers partially down to see if she was actually using anything other than guesswork. To his surprise there were actually tendrils of magic swirling around the woman's hands as she lent over the ball frowning deeply. They did not appear to be very focussed and Harry was pretty sure the professor was not really aware of them, but they were there. It occurred to Harry that Trelawney had made predictions that were true and hence had some talent even if most of her ability was formed on guesswork.

[Do you think it's possible that Divination works,] Harry asked Draco silently, [but people can't make it happen?]

[Hmm,] was Draco's reply and Harry glanced around again to see that the incense was having a similar effect on his lover as it had always had on him: Draco was falling asleep.

Harry sent his soul mate an image of what he was looking at which woke Draco up a bit.

[Could be,] he said reluctantly, [or it could be just random stuff. Now will you let me go to sleep, this is your extra-curricular activity, I'm here under protest?]

From the tone of Draco's reply Harry knew that he was not going to get a sensible conversation out of his lover so he let it drop, turning his attention back to Professor Trelawney. He watched, for the first time interested in the technique the woman was using and eventually the professor ended her demonstration and told the rest to work with their own crystal balls.

For a moment Harry just observed the rest of the group as they lent over their divination aids and he was surprised to see that some of Trelawney's groupies had similar flickers of magic flying around their hands. It leant weight to his theory that maybe Divination wasn't just a fluke all the time, but it by no means

proved it. Harry found that he was actually curious about the subject. When Neville's crystal ball somehow jumped out of its holder and rolled across the table towards Lavender, Harry became very interested.

"Professor," he said quietly as the woman watched the group, "divination comes from inside doesn't it: the crystals and charts and things are just aids aren't they?"

There was quite a surprised expression on the woman's face when she looked at him: Harry did not think she expected him to ask questions.

"That's one way of looking at it," Professor Trelawney replied and her voice held none of its normal melodramatic flare. "The external stimuli give a channel to visions, but the truth comes from the viewer."

"That would suggest that some people would be better at using some things than others," Harry continued his train of thought, "and vice versa, wouldn't it?"

The Divination mistress nodded.

"Most with the talent find they prefer one medium or other," Professor Trelawney replied and for the first time Harry felt as if he was having a real conversation with the woman rather than a staged performance.

"You see Neville seems to be having a problem with his crystal ball?" Harry continued calmly as his eyes watched Neville place the clear ball back in its stand.

That question seemed to confuse the Professor, but she nodded again anyway.

"I don't think it's his fault," he continued quietly. "I don't think the balls we're using suit him."

Professor Trelawney looked surprised and slightly unsure; Harry decided to explain.

"When you used the crystal ball," he said calmly, "you had gold sparks coming from your hands. Everyone else in the group who has anything has gold ones too, except Neville: his are silver and are bouncing off whenever they touch the ball."

The professor sat there for a moment with a vaguely stunned expression on her face and Harry waited for her reaction. Eventually she gave him a genuinely warm smile.

"Thank you, Harry," she said quietly, "I will see what I can do."

She climbed to her feet and walked to the other end of the room where she pulled aside a small curtain. When she turned back she was holding another crystal ball, only this one was completely black rather than being clear.

"Neville," she said, back to her normal dramatic tone, "I would like you to try this one: your energies are flowing differently today."

The boy looked surprised and a little nervous and Harry had to sympathise: the new crystal looked hideously expensive. Harry continued to watch as Professor Trelawney placed the new ball on the table in front of the shocked Longbottom and whispered something in the boy's ear. Under the Professor's guidance Neville went back to what he had been doing, but with the new ball and the silver sparks

coming from his hands swirled around the crystal and when they hit it they flowed into the dark surface. With a satisfied grin Harry turned to his own crystal ball.

It took him a couple of minutes to produce the sparks from his own fingers and a great deal of concentration. Divination was harder than it looked and Harry decided that maybe there was a reason for teaching it. It took him another half an hour to realise that just because he had the sparks it didn't mean the whole thing was suddenly going to become obvious. He knew there was a connection being made between himself and the crystal ball, but how on earth he was supposed to use it he had no idea.

"One must make order out of the chaos that is the future," Professor Trelawney announced to the group just as Harry was about to throw his hands up in disgust.

He looked at the sparks again and they did look chaotic which gave him an idea. Taking a deep breath he tried to figure out what was controlling their flow. He watched them and attempted to find some pattern, but nothing seemed obvious which was rather frustrating. He mumbled in annoyance and the sparks sped up into an even more chaotic dance. Harry sat there for a moment and then it hit him: the sparks were reacting to the chaos in his brain. When he meditated he focused and removed the chaos so systematically he began to empty out his mind, calming his thoughts as much as he could and just concentrating on the empty space that was the crystal ball. Gradually, the magic slowed down and each spark took up a position around the centre of Harry attention.

He was completely focussed and when the magic suddenly shot into the crystal ball he felt his body stiffen as awareness of his environment vanished.

Harry came back to his senses with the sensation of his forehead splitting in two and his right hand flew to his scar before he even thought about it. He knew the dizzy nauseous feeling of almost passing out very well by now and he moved to the side and put his head a low as possible before he either threw up or fainted.

"Potter, talk to me," Draco demanded from where he had both hands on Harry's shoulders.

Absently Harry thought it was funny how his lover would often resort to his last name when he was stressed.

"Ow," he answered in a very dazed, confused manner.

"Don't you ever do that to me again," Draco was obviously very stressed since he was admitting to a weakness where everyone could hear.

"Oh hell," Harry said mournfully wishing to be a lot less conspicuous, but unwilling to take his hand away from his scar since it felt like it was the only thing holding his head together, "I did it again didn't I?"

It then occurred to him that there was complete silence from the rest of the room. He sat up slowly and looked around the group to find that everyone was staring at him.

"Group, back to work," surprisingly Professor Trelawney came to his rescue, clapping her hands to break every one out of the stony silence.

Only when the rest of the pupils had returned to their crystal balls did the Divination teacher walk over to Harry and Draco.

"Are you feeling alright, Harry?" she asked calmly.

"Except for a splitting headache, yes thank you," he replied as politely as he could manage.

"Perhaps you should go and see Madame Pomfrey for a potion," Professor Trelawney suggested helpfully.

Harry fished in his pocket and pulled out the small bottle.

"Already have one, thanks," he said while trying to figure out what had happened. "May I have some water please?"

The Divination Professor nodded and moved to help. Harry felt that he was seeing a completely different side to the woman than usual. When she was gone he turned and looked at a very pensive Draco.

[Was it the same?] he asked silently.

For a few seconds Draco did not reply: he really looked worried.

[Yes, you went somewhere,] his soul mate finally told him, [and I don't know where. It was horrible; you wouldn't talk to me at all and then you told everyone that my father was going to try and kill me because Voldemort was going to tell him to.]

[I seem to be fond of that don't I?] Harry hated that he seemed to be predicting his lover's death.

[Well what you said was: 'The father shall trap his golden child at the will of the Dark Lord or fall forever from his service.'] Draco explained and his emotions were a mixture of anxiety, annoyance, betrayal and just a touch of fear. [There may be other candidates for a date with death at the hands of their parents, but I think I'm the most likely, so yes you seem quite fond of that.]

Harry chose not to disagree, after all his soul mate was correct.

[Predictions are there to help us change things,] he said firmly, [and it isn't as if we didn't have a pretty good idea that your dad would try something anyway. I was probably just dragging up stuff from my subconscious.]

His last affirmation did not ring true and both he and Draco knew it, but they both just let it hang. The incident appeared to have affected the Slytherin quite badly and he was looking and feeling shocked and unsettled. Harry placed a hand supportively on his lover's arm.

[I won't do it again, I promise,] he said faithfully.

Just then Professor Trelawney returned with the water and placed it on the table.

"Will you be alright, Harry?" the woman asked genuinely as Harry put a few drops of the headache cure in the glass.

"Yes thank you, Professor," the young man replied, swirling the water in its vessel in a mirror of the thoughts in his head, "I just need to sit quietly for a while."

The eccentrically dressed woman smiled and nodded.

"Take as long as you require," she said kindly, so different from the woman Harry was used to that he felt as if he was talking to a different person. "If you wouldn't mind staying behind for a few minutes when the other's leave. I think it would be better if we speak alone."

Harry nodded without pausing for thought: he also very much wanted to talk to the Professor Trelawney without the rest of the year over hearing.

[I am beginning to think the entire world underestimates Professor Trelawney,] Harry commented silently to his lover as he downed the headache cure.

[As unlikely as it seems, I think you may be right,] Draco admitted as he watched the woman return to the rest of the group.

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The rest of the afternoon in the classroom seemed to go very slowly. Harry and Draco sat quietly in their seats watching Professor Trelawney move between her students and assist them in their efforts. For the first time since the end of his first class with the woman, Draco found himself watching her closely, actually paying attention and he was coming to some remarkable conclusions. Professor Trelawney was not who she pretended to be.

He decided that the woman had an incredibly good smokescreen, so good in fact that no member of staff or student in the school suspected her of being anything but the batty woman she appeared to be. However, studying her closely, Draco could see the image change depending on who the professor was talking to: she adjusted her persona slightly depending on her audience. It had been quite a shock to realise that he had been underestimating her quite so badly for the last four and a half years; Draco was not used to misjudging people so completely. It also did not escape his notice that he and Harry had been allowed to see part of the real Professor Trelawney.

As the last of the group filed out and the hatch closed, Draco prepared to find out just who this teacher really was as she walked over and sat down on the chair opposite them. From the emotions coming from Harry he was waiting for the same thing.

"Thank you for staying, Gentlemen," Professor Trelawney said with a smile, somewhere between the over exuberant woman most of the school saw and a normal human being.

"I think I owe you an apology," Harry told the professor and managed to catch Draco by surprise.

The woman bowed her head in recognition of the compliment and then shared a look with Draco; the Slytherin had the sudden thought that he was looking at one of his own house.

"Being a seer is a perilous position," the professor said calmly, "and unpredictable at best. I have grown into the role of an eccentric, but I was not always that way. There have been seers in my family for generations and they have often been

targets for madmen and despots. Those that were not were those who had the brains to appear to be nothing but charlatans with the occasional good guess. For those of my students who have a gift, I do my best to help them, for those who do not, I play the batty woman in the attic."

The way she delivered the last sentence was in her usual eccentric tone and Draco found himself smiling.

"I did not think Professor Dumbledore would hire someone just because of one prophecy," Harry admitted thoughtfully.

"I have other uses," the woman replied with a smile, "although my usual gift is no where near as detailed at the visions with which I have been blessed. From time to time I see things which have proved useful, although I admit to never having seen anything about both of you coming together."

"I'm not sure the universe was quite sure of that outcome either," Draco said dryly.

The fire flared as if to agree and drew a laugh from Professor Trelawney completely unlike the absent, vaguely absurd laugh she normally used.

"Divination and Prophecy are not the same thing," the eccentrically dressed woman said calmly, "although they stem from the same root. I sense neither the inclination nor the talent in either of you for Divination, although I pride myself in encouraging both of your creative writing talents when you were in my class."

Draco managed a rueful smile at that revelation; he remembered predicting Harry's death in many weird and wonderful ways once he had cottoned on to the professor's seeming obsession.

"Divination is the art of tuning into the energies of time and perceiving possible events," Professor Trelawney continued her explanation. "It may be taught and those with an aptitude may improve. Prophecy is the gift of the universe given when it sees fit, to any whose minds are open to receive its message. You appear to have achieved that state twice, and from what I understand have been given a similar warning each time, Harry."

Of that there was no doubt in Draco's mind; his soul mate had definitely been warned. The whole idea of Prophecy made the Slytherin uncomfortable, the thought that there was an event approaching that could not be avoided and would end in only one of two ways was not compatible with Draco's need for control.

"I would council against ever attempting to use your sensitivity in this area deliberately," Professor Trelawney said calmly. "Prophecy can lead to over confidence and misdirection, especially if forced."

"I wasn't trying to see anything the first time," Harry replied honestly, "and I was just doing what you suggested the second time."

"And I suspect this was a message the universe wished to be made known, I merely wished you to understand that you may never make another prediction," the professor replied calmly. "But know this, guard your soul mate well, Elemental Child," she continued in what sounded more like the person Draco had come to expect, "he is in great danger."

The Slytherin did not comment, but he could feel Harry taking the woman's words on board. Draco found he had new respect for Professor Trelawney, but he wished she hadn't said that. He would have to work on making sure his lover did not try to lock him in their room for safe keeping.

Chapter 29 Peace Talks

It had been a week and a half since Harry had been taken over by the vision and the incident had goaded Draco into action. The Slytherin had plans for his one-time friends that he had not yet set about implementing, but the reminder of his father and Voldemort had pushed him into motion. He had spoken to Harry at length about turning as many of the Slytherins as possible away from their current course straight into the Dark Lord's employ and the Gryffindor was quite willing to help in anyway he could.

As it was, the first move was to be Draco's alone, but Harry stood in an alcove in the dungeon corridor under his invisibility cloak as backup just in case. Running up to a Slytherin, telling them the truth and hoping that they would have an attack of conscience was not something that would work, but as Draco pointed out: he had been the prince of Slytherin for a long time and he played the game better than any of them.

[She's coming and she's alone,] Harry told his soul mate silently as he used his peculiar senses to isolate the magical field that was Pansy Parkinson.

As expected, Pansy was performing her prefect duties and patrolling the dungeon corridors for stray students before she retired to bed. Since Draco was the other prefect from the seventh year she was without company, which was what the blond youth had been counting on. The young woman walked around the corner and came to a complete stop when she saw Draco standing in the middle of the corridor.

"Good evening, Pansy," he said politely and Harry marvelled at how relaxed his lover looked and sounded.

"What are you doing here?" the female prefect snapped back and although she held her shoulders straight and looked Draco directly in the eye; it was not difficult to see that she was nervous.

Harry gripped his wand under the cloak and kept his senses extended in case of surprises: nervous Slytherins were dangerous Slytherins, although he doubted Pansy would try anything on her own.

"I wanted to talk to you," Draco replied straightforwardly, his demeanour still calm and collected.

"I have nothing to say to traitors," Pansy said viciously and went to leave.

"How very Gryffindor of you," Harry's soul mate said casually which froze the young woman in place.

Pansy had half turned away, but at the insult she turned back with a furious look in her eyes.

"How dare you!" she said pointedly.

"Knowledge is power, Pansy," Draco said evenly, "what can you lose by talking to me? Gryffindors turn their back on traitors, Slytherins learn all they can and then they remove the traitor when they have the knowledge they need."

Even though the situation was full of tension Harry couldn't help but smile at the torn expression that graced the young woman's face for a moment. Pansy was out of her league when it came to deviousness and Draco.

"Left your pet with his Mudblood friends?" the female prefect tried to regain ground by throwing an insult, but even Harry knew a diversionary tactic when he heard one.

He knew he would never be a master schemer like his lover, but he could not deny that he was learning.

"I told you last time, Pansy," Draco said without reacting to the dig, "Harry has nothing to do with my reasons for rejecting Voldemort."

"But you abandoned your friends for him," the young woman said hotly.

A jolt of surprise went through Draco as Pansy's reply caught him off guard. It occurred to Harry that his lover had not considered the possibility that any of his housemates might actually miss him.

"I couldn't come back, Pansy," Draco said after a few moments' silence, "both Harry and I would have been trussed up and delivered to Voldemort within a month, but I did not abandon you. They offered to resort me into Gryffindor, but I am a Slytherin and a Slytherin I will stay. The rest of the school is right about one thing, Pansy: there is too much dark influence in our house."

"You never felt that way before," Draco's old friend said firmly.

Harry watched as his lover's shoulders tensed slightly and he knew what was coming. This was Draco's gambit, the play that would either open new avenues or close them forever: he was going to tell Pansy the whole truth about why he changed sides.

"Before I hadn't seen the madness that is Voldemort and his followers," Harry's soul mate said evenly. "You've known my family for a long time, Pansy, would you say my father was a rational man?"

Without hesitation the young woman nodded although she appeared suspicious.

"That's what I thought as well," Draco continued smoothly, although Harry could feel the mix of emotions that recalling his betrayal caused in his lover. "Oh he sought perfection and he was never easy on me, but if I disagreed with him about something we would talk it out as long as I showed no disrespect and did not voice my opinions publicly. I found out the hard way that rational thought does not apply to his attitudes in some situations."

Pansy was looking nervously interested now: Harry suspected she realised she was about to become party to information that very few had.

"When I saw Voldemort I saw an insane creature not fit to lead Dementors, let alone a pureblood army," Draco maintained his emotionless tone. "I did not think my impressions could be completely correct and I wanted to understand, so I told my father the truth when we returned home. I expected him to take me into his study and explain things I did not know; I expected a rational conversation where he talked me round as he often had in the past. What happened was that my father, Lucius Malfoy, paragon of calm calculated darkness, head of the perfect family took me, his son, down to the cellar and subjected me to the Cruciatus

curse until I begged to be forgiven. I didn't like what I saw when I met Voldemort, but what really frightened me was the look in my father's eyes as he tortured me."

The female Slytherin had gone pale and she appeared horrified, but it soon faded into suspicion.

"He would never have," Pansy said the disbelief clear in her voice.

Draco gave her a cold smile.

"You know me, Pansy," he said evenly, "did you think I changed sides on a whim, that I abandoned everything I have ever known because I felt like a bit of teenage rebellion? If the only way to convince your own child that they should follow you into the Dark Lord's service is to torture them into submission then it can only be the wrong choice. I did not suddenly decide I wanted to be a Gryffindor hero. I looked at my choices and I weighed them up like any Slytherin would do. I am asking only the same of you."

"And if I decide I prefer my chances with the Dark Lord?" Pansy asked, still suspicious, but Harry realised that Draco's first aim had already been accomplished: the young woman had not dismissed the idea out of hand.

"Then that is your choice," Draco replied, "but at least you will have made it yourself. They teach us to be devious and independent, but then they expect us to follow them blindly down the path they chose. I think we deserve better than that."

The female prefect did not appear convinced, but neither was she reaching for her wand to hex Draco into oblivion, which was a much better situation than the last time the two had met.

"I'll look," she said eventually, "but don't mistake me, Draco, we are still enemies."

With a small nod Draco acknowledged his old friend's affirmation and then the young woman turned on her heel and walked away: the meeting was over. Harry waited until Pansy was two corners away before he stepped up behind his soul mate and let the invisibility cloak fall from his shoulders. Wrapping his arms around Draco he looked to where his lover was staring at the last place the blond wizard had been able to see his housemate.

[So it begins,] Draco said silently.

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Harry was laughing at something Ron said as he walked into the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom when all humour drained away in one instant. The feeling that ran through him was familiar: he remembered it all too clearly and he had both been dreading and longing for its return for almost seven weeks. His eyes scanned the room quickly and caught sight of the dark shape appearing to the right. Suddenly the room was spinning and Harry felt himself falling to his knees as he tried to force the barrier between himself and whatever energy his godfather was into place.

It was not that the power from which Harry was trying to cut himself off was particularly strong, it was the fact that every cell in his body was screaming that

it should not be. His whole being was rebelling against the entire experience and it was difficult to manage coherent thought when every fibre of the fabric of your existence was trying to be heard at the same time. The fact that Draco was coming to DADA from the other side of the school today and hence was not in attendance did not help either.

"Harry," he heard as well as sort of felt his godfather's voice as he curled over his knees clutching his arms to his chest trying desperately to regain control, "oh hell, I'm hurting you, I shouldn't have come."

That was not the right thing to say: it pissed Harry off and some of the turmoil in his brain dimmed in a wave of righteous annoyance. His arm shot out and he waved a finger in the direction where he could sense his godfather, although he did not look up yet.

"Don't you dare go anywhere," he half said, half snarled.

"Wasn't planning on it, Mate," Ron sounded bemused and a little shocked from beside him.

The irrational desire to laugh crowded into Harry's already over taxed brain and a slightly hysterical giggle escaped from his lips before he bit it off.

[I'm coming,] Draco's voice in his head was a calming centre and he clung to it firmly.

With the extra help, Harry's mind cooperated and control surged into the chaos. One moment his thoughts and body were screaming at him uncooperatively and then everything went quiet: the relief left him gasping on the floor.

"Move it or lose it, Goyle," Draco's voice sounded from the hallway and then Harry felt his soul mate come charging into the room.

The Hecatemus was just pushing himself back onto his haunches when Draco's hand connected with his shoulder and it was like energy surging through his veins. All inner struggle ceased as Draco's physical presence sured up Harry's new barrier and the Gryffindor finally had the courage to look up at the figure which had caused the whole scene.

Sirius appeared shocked, worried and somewhat guilty, all of which surprised his godson. Harry was not sure what he had expected from his dead godfather, but what he was seeing was definitely not it. It left him at rather a loss as to what to say.

There were mutterings from the rest of the pupils who were still standing in the doorway at which point the door to Professor Daemon's rooms opened and the DADA teacher appeared. Kesquit Daemon was the seventh defence teacher Harry had had at Hogwarts and she was one of the few who was competent at her job. She recognised the strengths and weaknesses of her pupils and treated them all with the respect they earned. She surveyed the scene in her classroom calmly.

"Is there a problem, Harry?" the blond woman asked reasonably.

[Follow my lead,] Draco said silently to his lover.

"Something in here caused Harry to overload, Professor," the Slytherin said politely, "he needs to go somewhere quiet and sit down for a bit."

[I'm fine,] the Gryffindor pointed out and exhibited his shield to demonstrate.

[Do you want to have to explain why you're talking to Sirius Black or do you want to go somewhere and talk to him privately?] Draco asked reasonably.

"I'll be fine," Harry said resolutely and then slumped against Draco with his best dazed expression on his face.

"I think perhaps you should do as Draco suggests, Harry," Professor Daemon said and walked down the steps into the classroom properly. "I'll have the class notes sent over for you both after the lesson."

Harry allowed himself to be helped to his feet and lent on Draco as if he needed the support. He sent Ron a surreptitious look and tried to convey that he was actually fine and then both Hecatemus and soul mate left the room. Harry did not have to look to know that Sirius was following them.

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Draco and Harry walked down the corridor slowly until they turned the corner at which point they separated and Harry spun around to look at the figure of his godfather. Sirius looked exactly the same as the day Harry had watched him fall through the veil and it brought the whole event crashing back to the front of his thoughts.

"I'm sorry," he said as soon as he could convince his mouth to work.

Sirius looked confused and a little lost, not at all what Harry expected of someone who had seen the other side. There was so much the young man wanted to say, so much he wanted to know, but no words would form as he stared at the essence of his godfather.

"Harry," the man said slowly, "you don't have anything to be sorry for."

"I killed you," the words slipped out of Harry's mouth in a breathless rush before he could think of anything else.

The fear this admission brought with it caused Harry's throat to tighten and it was like he was suffocating. The obvious pain that flashed across Sirius' face was almost more than Harry could take. For a moment all he wanted to do was run, only Draco's hand on his arm stopped him. As it was, he had to look away, his eyes falling to the floor.

"Oh Merlin, Harry," his godfather said in a surprisingly gentle tone, "you didn't kill me, my own arrogance did that."

That drew the Gryffindor's eyes back to Sirius, a denial rising to his lips. The sad, apologetic look in his godfather's eyes stopped all sound from leaving Harry.

"I'm the one who should be saying sorry to you, Harry," the older man said, looking for all the world as if he had just come back for a visit. "I was so overjoyed at getting out of that house that I was careless. As usual I acted first and asked questions later, only this time there was no James to stop me killing myself or someone else."

Harry winced and looked down again at the reference to his father and couldn't help but feel inadequate. He should have saved him; his dad would have saved Sirius.

"I couldn't reach you," he tried to explain; he wanted to show Sirius that he tried.

"Oh, bloody hell, I'm worse at this than Snape would be," Harry heard his godfather growl and chanced another look up. "I didn't mean you should have saved me, Harry. I seem to remember you were busy staying alive at the time. What I meant was that I've always been the same, only before Azkaban I had your dad to drag me out of the ridiculous situations I would get myself into. I'm a reckless fool, and I always have been; only this time my foolishness left you all alone. I will never forgive myself for abandoning you like that."

It was difficult to take in what he was hearing and Harry could not let his godfather take the blame. It was Harry's fault that they had all been at the Ministry in the first place.

"If I hadn't been such an idiot," he said a little desperately; "if I hadn't ruined the Occlumency lessons; if I had understood how important they would be ... It's all my fault. I fell for Voldemort's trap, I led everyone into danger. It was me."

Tears burned behind Harry's eyes: tears of anger and self loathing; tears of pain and sorrow. He hadn't been able to cry since the first time he had seen Sirius like this, but now he could barely hold it back.

"You were fifteen, Harry," Sirius said earnestly, his own voice full of anguish, "we all expected far too much off you. Anyone else would have folded under the pressure. I've watched you, Harry. Over the past year and a half I've seen you grow and I've seen you live with a pain that would cripple most. You have made me so proud, and you made me realise that you are a much better man than I ever was. I know I would have made a lousy father, but I love you, Harry; you are like the child I will never have."

Harry couldn't stop the tears then and sob which was wrenched from his body caused Draco to step up close to him and wrap his arms around the Hecatemus. Silent comfort came from his soul mate in waves of love and sympathy, but they could not wash away the tide of emotions which threatened to drown Harry. He had expected some sort of recrimination; maybe not a condemnation but definitely not this.

"You have never been a fool," Harry managed to make his mouth work eventually, although the tears he could see glistening on his godfather's cheeks did not help his equilibrium much. "You are the most courageous man I have ever met."

Even though Harry very rarely allowed himself to touch or be touched by anyone other than Draco, at that moment Harry wished fervently that Sirius was solid. He wanted to feel the reassuring hug he had felt just a few times before and he wanted to return it. Harry found his hand reaching out even though in his mind he knew that Sirius was non-corporeal and before his godfather could move away or Draco could stop him, his fingers connected with the energy that made up Sirius.

The very ends of his digits disappeared into the opaque vision that was his godfather and a force like none he had ever felt before leapt up Harry's arm. It was blinding and nerve shattering, but strangely intoxicating as well as the young

man was overcome by the sudden sense of his godfather. It was not like seeing into Sirius' mind, but more as if Harry was engulfed by the man as a whole, seeing him fully for the first time. Unfortunately the experience also brought with it the sense of the wrongness that Harry had felt before he had blocked it and it sliced straight through his shield against it. One moment there was a sense of clarity as the Hecatemus sensed his godfather and the next there was blackness.

Harry opened his eyes slowly, blinking back the brightness and allowing his thoughts to settle into some semblance of order. He had not been out for very long, he could tell from the reaction he could still feel in Draco, but he was sitting on the floor resting up against his lover, wrapped in a strong embrace.

"You two are as bad as each other," Draco's tone was exasperated and Harry could feel the anxiety he had caused still running through his soul mate. "Harry didn't it occur to you that if Sirius causes you to nearly pass out when he enters the same room, touching him might be a very bad idea?"

[I had to,] Harry replied silently, not trusting his voice to work correctly, [I'm sorry, I had to.]

Draco did not reply, but his embrace tightened for a moment and Harry knew he was forgiven. It was strange, but even though his mental barriers were battered, he felt much calmer than before the incident.

"Are you two both okay?" Sirius asked from where he was crouching a few feet away. "I can attract someone's attention if you need me to."

For a second Harry almost just told his godfather that he'd be fine in a moment and then his mind caught up with what the man had just said.

"No one but us can see you," he pointed out.

"True," Sirius replied with a nod, "but I can affect things a little if I try really hard. I could push over a suit of armour or something."

"We'll be fine, thank you," Draco stepped in before Harry's godfather could demonstrate.

Harry would have tried to stand up, but he knew from experience that sitting quietly for a few minutes would be much the best course of action. However, rather than being afraid of what Sirius might do or might be feeling, Harry now felt an overwhelming curiosity. The guilt that had all but consumed him earlier had not simply vanished, but it was far easier to deal with knowing that his godfather really did not blame him, even if he chose to blame himself.

At Sirius' admittance that he could affect his environment something tried to spark in Harry's memory, but it wouldn't quite make itself known.

"Have you ever affected me?" he found himself asking quietly.

"Once," the dark haired man replied honestly. "Last year when that bludger caught you in the Gryffindor practice and you fell. I don't know how I did it exactly, but I stopped you hitting bottom too hard."

The recollection sparked in Harry's mind and it all made sense. At the time he had assumed that Hermione had saved him since she had been watching the practice and was the only one with a wand in her possession, but there had been

such a kafuffle that Harry had never got round to thanking her. It had felt very odd and now the Hecatemus knew why.

"Um, thanks," was about all he could come up with to say which caused Draco to laugh.

"Gryffindors," was the only comment he would make when Harry looked at him quizzically.

That made Harry smile and suddenly his head was full of things he wanted to ask and things he wanted to tell his godfather. He looked the man straight in the eye.

"Thanks for coming," the young man said earnestly. "Can we sit down properly and have a chat? How long can you stay?"

"I usually manage a couple of hours," Sirius replied with a slight smile of his own, "unless I do something showy."

"And you'd never do anything like that would you," Harry replied with a grin.

That drew a chuckle out of Sirius and the Hecatemus let himself have just a little hope that this would be okay.

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There was a tentative knock at their door as Harry sat on the bed, quill in hand, but quite incapable of writing the essay he was supposed to be working on. Draco was quietly looking over the notes Professor Deamon had sent over from the DADA lesson and had not commented on his lover's lack of concentration.

Sirius's visit had rather shaken Harry and although he was much calmer than he had been, and, for that matter, far more comfortable with the idea that his godfather was still around, he could not stop his thoughts spinning. Without even thinking about what he was doing Harry let his magical sense focus on whoever was beyond the door.

"Come in, Ron," he called and waited for his friend to do so.

The talk with Sirius had lasted well over an hour before the man had begun to find it difficult to retain his physical integrity. He had said he usually managed longer than that, which had caused more guilt in Harry, since he suspected it had been his touching his godfather which had shortened his stay. The issues between them were by no means completely settled, but healing had begun and Harry was happier than he had been since Sirius' first visit, almost back to the buoyant self he had found when he bonded with Draco.

Harry had been expecting Ron to come and find out what was going on as soon as lessons ended for the day, and the redhead had not disappointed.

"How'd you know it was me?" Ron asked curiously as walked in. "Can you see through doors now? Let me guess, the whole thing in DADA was a new power coming online."

The slight irreverence that his friend had taken to using when it came to any revelations about Harry was a relief to him. He suspected it was as much a coping mechanism as Draco's sarcasm, but Harry appreciated the effort.

"No, it wasn't," he told Ron with a smile, "it was Sirius coming back. But as for the other thing, it's more that the door is irrelevant rather than that I can see through it."

Harry watched as possible responses to those pieces of information battled it out in his friend's features. It was quite obvious that Ron didn't know what to ask first.

"If you don't mind me saying," his friend said eventually, sounding a little awkward, "you look rather cheerful for having seen Padfoot."

"Your tact amazes me, Weasley," Draco said from where he was still reading. "They had a bit of a chat, shared out the guilt evenly like good Gryffindors, and now they're fine about it."

The sarcasm would have sounded scathing to some, but Harry was glad his lover had stepped in: explaining what he was feeling at the moment would have been difficult and Draco had just saved him from that. Ron still appeared somewhat puzzled, but no longer as curious.

"We talked for a long time," Harry confirmed his soul mate's words, "and it's okay."

His best friend looked at him evenly for a while and then nodded with a smile.

"All I need to know," he said firmly. "If you ever need someone to talk to other than the ferret, you know I'll be here, though, right?"

Harry smiled and nodded as Draco snorted his contempt at the way he had been described. It was, however, quite plain to both Ron and Harry that the redhead was forgiven since the Slytherin continued what he was doing without comment.

"Hermione said she'd be up in a while," Ron offered as Harry tapped the bed and his friend sat down, "she might be a little pushier. Anyway, about this doors being irrelevant thing."

With a grin Harry tried to figure out how to explain his magical sense to his friend.

Chapter 30 Home?

The Easter holidays were upon them and Dumbledore had called the bonded pair into his office and suggested a small holiday as far away from sources of strong magic as possible. Harry knew he was a little ragged around the edges even though his control was very good these days, but the only place he could go was the Dursleys' and that was not something he fancied. However, somehow the headmaster had convinced Draco it was a good idea and after that Harry had been unable to change his lover's mind, so to the Dursleys' they were going.

Harry was throwing the last of his stuff into the small trunk he had borrowed off Neville when Ron knocked on the door. He was not going away for very long so he didn't need his big trunk and the smaller one was far easier to carry, but he only had an hour before they were leaving and he was running late. Even so, Ron appeared somewhat anxious so Harry stopped what he was doing and turned to his friend.

"Hi, Ron," he said brightly, "what can I do for you?"

His friend stepped into the room and closed the door.

"Um, Harry," Ron began hesitantly, "um, you know that both Hermione and me are staying here over the Easter holidays?"

Harry nodded: they had originally planned to all stay together until Dumbledore had come up with the idea that Harry needed to get away.

"Well, I was wondering, since you and Draco are going to be off in Muggle-land," Ron continued, still failing to get to the point. "Could we, that is, um."

"Spit it out, Ron," Harry said with a grin.

"Could we borrow your room for a night?" his friend finally said in a mad rush.

It took a moment for Harry to catch up and then his face broke into a full-fledged toothy smile.

"So you and Hermione are finally going to do the deed then?" he couldn't help teasing Ron just a little since Harry had taken enough stick over the months about his sex drive.

Ron was slowly turning a lovely shade of scarlet.

"Harry," he said in a warning tone.

"I don't know," the Hecatemus said, unwilling to give up just yet, "aiding and abetting the head girl and her boyfriend to break one of the strictest school rules: Bit risky that."

Ron was glaring at him now.

"You're really picking up some bad habits from Malfoy," his friend said as Harry laughed at him.

"Sorry, Ron," Harry apologised and patted his friend on the arm, "but turn around is fair play."

Ron muttered something under his breath that Harry couldn't hear.

"If you curse me you can't borrow the room," Harry said lightly.

"Then we can?" Ron said, brightening. "Borrow the room that is?"

"Of course you can borrow the room and for as many nights as you like," Harry said rolling his eyes, "just don't let McGonagall catch you or she'll skin all of us, not just you two."

Forgetting his previous ire, Ron now beamed.

"Thanks, Harry," his friend said brightly, "you're a real mate."

Ron turned to leave, but Harry caught him before he opened the door.

"Just one thing, Ron," he said evenly, "don't tell anyone else. This room is not becoming a brothel."

His friend grinned and nodded, and then he left.

====

Draco looked up at number 4 Privet Drive dubiously. When Dumbledore had suggested that they spend a week with the Dursleys both Harry and Draco had thought the old wizard had finally lost his marbles, but then the headmaster had taken Draco aside and explained his reasoning. Harry needed a break from magic and with all out war on the horizon there was only one place safe for him to get it. After that Draco had talked his lover into the whole idea.

That, however, did not make him feel anymore comfortable about the whole Muggle experience, especially after what Harry had told him about these particular Muggles. Dumbledore had assured Draco that the Dursleys would be aware of the situation at least enough to know not to interfere, but the young Malfoy had his suspicions that things were not going to be easy. The Dursleys had been conspicuously absent from the train station to pick them up for a start and they had had to catch a Taxi. It was the first time Draco had ever been in a Muggle mini-cab and he had not been impressed. The noisy car had been a big step down from the chauffeur driven vehicles he had been in before, and the lack of cushioning spells had not made him happy.

[Don't look so worried,] Harry said silently as they stood on the drive, [they'll be horrible, but it won't kill us.]

[Are you sure?] Draco asked suspiciously.

The Muggle world just felt so inconvenient to a young man who had rarely set foot in it. The whole process of doing everything was so slow and nothing was easy. Then there was the fact that everyone in the wizarding world always looked at Harry like a hero, even those who saw him as the enemy recognised that, and the fact there were people around who thought of him as a lower life form was difficult to believe. Of course Draco believed Harry completely when he explained the situation, after all he believed everything Harry told him these days since they couldn't lie to each other, but it still did not feel right.

[You know I never took you for a worrier,] Harry's mental voice was amused.

[That's because I wasn't,] Draco returned in kind. [You're the one who's turned me into a worrywart. I would like it understood that my approaching nervous breakdown is all your fault.]

Harry laughed at that and they picked up their trunks. The front door was actually open waiting for them and Harry went in first with Draco sticking as close to him as possible.

"Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, Dudley?" Harry called out expectantly.

"Close the door you're letting in the cold air," came what sounded to Draco like a terrified response.

From the emotions coming off Harry, Draco did not think that The Boy Who Lived was aware of the reaction he caused in his relations. The two young men left their luggage in the hall and walked towards the source of the voice and, as they moved into the lounge, Draco was not impressed. The Dursleys were standing in the far corner of the room as a tight family unit and they were eyeing Harry and Draco like they might bite. The look in the slug-like man's eyes backed up Draco's initial assessment of the situation: these people were afraid of Harry.

"This is most inconvenient," Mr Dursley blustered as Draco watched him, fascinated.

If the situation had involved anyone but Harry, Draco might have found the whole thing amusing, as it was he couldn't believe that his lover had managed to spend his formative years with these primitives and turn out to be the hero he was.

"Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, Dudley," Harry introduced evenly, "this is Draco; Draco, my relatives."

The way the three Muggles looked at him, Draco realised that in their opinion he was beneath contempt: it was not an idea he was used to and it annoyed him. Cultivating a smile that could have terrified the Dark Lord himself, Draco fixed then one by one with his eyes.

"Interesting to meet you at last," he said smoothly, "Harry has told me all about you."

If the Durleys hadn't been backed up against the far wall as it was, Draco was pretty sure they would all have taken a step further away. He was, overall, pleased with the result.

"We'll be going upstairs then," Harry interrupted the moment and gave him a look: it was difficult not to notice that Harry found the situation amusing, but he also appeared a little conflicted. "It's been a long day and we'll just get out of your way."

Draco kept his eyes on the Muggles as Harry turned to leave the room. He made eye contact with his lover's Uncle for a few moments, daring the other man to make a comment and then he followed his soul mate back into the hall. It was only after they entered the room, which Draco immediately assessed as pokey and dreary, that Harry turned to him and laughed.

[Oh that was even better than the tongue incident,] Harry said cheerfully and sat down on the shabby looking bed. [How do you inspire such terror? I've never found you that frightening.]

[That's because you've always wanted into my robes,] Draco replied and sat down next to his lover. [Anyway you inspire some serious fear yourself.]

Harry looked at him incredulously and now Draco was sure his soul mate had no idea the awe he inspired.

[Nah,] he said lightly, [they despise me, but they don't fear me. They only let me get away with anything because I told them my godfather was a raving psycho.]

[That might have been true once,] Draco said evenly, looking around the dismal room, [but trust me, now it's you who is inspiring the fear. I know about these things, remember who my father is. You actually live here?]

The aristocratic pureblood found the whole area distasteful and he wouldn't have let a servant sleep in such rooms let alone a member of the family. Draco's opinion of the Dursleys was going down by the second.

[You really think they're afraid of me?] Harry asked, ignoring the question. [What's frightening about me, except maybe the wand?]

Draco turned to face his lover then, realising that this was now bothering Harry.

[Let's see,] he said calmly, [you're six foot, one hundred percent muscle, you have eyes that could glare down a dragon when you're annoyed and oh yes, let's not forget, you're the strongest wizard since Merlin.]

Harry still appeared dubious.

[They don't know much about wizards,] he said with a frown, [they think I'm a failure. And being a gay failure probably hasn't improved my standing.]

Draco decided he didn't like where this conversation was going: either Harry was going to end up depressed or Draco was going to end up angry and he wanted neither, so he leant towards his lover and kissed him instead.

[Forget the Muggles,] he said flippantly, [we have a new place to christen.]

Harry did not resist until Draco pushed him down on to the bed and he moaned as which point he obviously remembered where he was.

[Maybe we should put up a silencing charm first,] Harry suggested as he broke the kiss.

[Why?] Draco returned with a raised eyebrow and a smile.

Slowly Harry mouth formed into a similar smile.

[You're evil,] he said mischievously.

[That's why you love me,] Draco replied cheerfully. [I wonder how much noise we can make before one of them would have the guts to come in here?]

[Do you really want Uncle Vernon walking in on us?] Harry asked playfully. [That would be enough to kill off anyone's ardour.]

Draco thought about this for a moment and had to agree.

[Okay,] he decided and went back to kissing Harry, [just enough noise so they remember we're here and know exactly what we're doing.]

[Oh Merlin,] his lover replied as Draco ran his hand up the inside of his leg. [I think I can manage that.]

====

It was the middle of the evening when Draco left a shagged out Harry to sleep upstairs. He had some things he wanted to sort out before anything in the household became too difficult. When Draco walked into the lounge the main reaction from the family was shock; they had obviously not been expecting to see him. The box in the corner was spewing out noise and pictures, but the three Muggles were now firmly focused on him.

"Good evening," he said cordially and favoured them with another of his devil-incarnate smiles.

Over the past few months he had discovered they worked far better than the patented Malfoy sneer: they were far more frightening even to those who didn't know him.

"What do you want?" Mr Dursley asked shortly.

Although the odious man had made the majority of Harry's life hell, Draco had to admire the fact that, even though he was terrified, the Muggle still managed to sound derogatory.

"I just have a few things to make clear," Draco said calmly, never for a minute letting the Dursleys see the extent of the distaste he held for them. "I do not care what you think of me, I don't even care what you think of Harry, you are all insignificant in my world view."

"How dare ..." Vernon Dursley tried to interrupt as his wife gasped in horror.

"Shut up or I will make you," Draco said pointedly.

Dursley looked as if he might blow a blood vessel as he went purple.

"I know you're not allowed to use magic outside that wretched school until you're an adult," the man blustered.

Draco smiled again and Vernon shut up. He really couldn't be bothered to try and explain that he was in fact an adult in his world; there were more important things he wanted to say.

"I want you to listen very carefully," he said evenly. "Harry is a genuinely nice chap; he respects the rules when they don't get in the way of him saving the world. I on the other hand am an evil bastard from a very long line of evil bastards and the only thing I care about is Harry. I know curses that would make your blood boil, literally, and I also know how to make sure no one would ever find out who did it. We are here for one reason and one reason only: Harry needs to rest. We will stay out of your way, you will stay out of ours and in one week we will be out of your hair. Is that alright with everyone?"

The three Dursleys were staring at him in wide-eyed shock but slowly Vernon nodded, followed by his wife and then his son.

"Good," Draco said lightly, "glad we have that out of the way." and then he turned and walked back the way he had come.

====

The Dursleys were a very predictable family and were hence daytime people: to avoid them, Draco and Harry became nocturnal. Vernon might have been under the impression that the pair was not allowed to do magic, but of course they could do anything they liked as long as the local Muggles didn't find out. Since the whole idea was that Harry should be away from lots of magic they had only used one of their repertoire and that was a silencing charm on the room. After their initial fun, no one outside could now hear what they were up to inside.

Since it was four in the morning when Draco wandered downstairs to find himself and Harry something to eat, he was surprised to find that the kitchen was not empty. He padded into the room with bare feet to find Harry's cousin Dudley with his head in the refrigerator.

Draco still found the whole idea of a Muggle kitchen bizarre, but he was nothing if not a quick learner and he had to admit that some of the ways the Muggles solved their needs were intriguing. He found the refrigerator quite fascinating with its strange noises and little light. Seeing Dudley with his ample behind sticking out of it was not as interesting, however.

Calmly Draco walked up behind the oblivious Muggle and said: "Are you finished yet?"

Dudley stood up straight instantly, forgetting that he had his upper body in something shorter than himself, hit his head on the top of the refrigerator and then leapt backwards clutching the bruised spot. His piggy eyes were open wide and he stared at Draco as if he was his worst fear. For his part, the Slytherin gazed at the boy evenly and let his lips curve in amusement. Draco milked the awe he inspired for a couple of seconds and then turned back to his task in hand, expecting the Dursley child to run away the same way he had the only other time they had come into contact.

Surprisingly, when he had retrieved what he wanted from the refrigerator and turned to place the items on the kitchen table, Dudley was still there. He jumped as if hexed when Draco actually looked at him a second time, but he was never-the-less still very much in the room.

"Did you want something?" Draco asked evenly.

It occurred to him that baiting and then terrorising the Muggle might be fun, but he knew Harry would disapprove and he was not in the mood for a fight. Dudley might deserve anything Draco could dish out, but he was not worth the effort.

"Yes?" Draco tried again when the portly Muggle just stared at him.

"Are you and Harry...?" the pitiful excuse for a human being began, but seemed unable to finish his sentence.

Draco let the pause hang for a while until he became impatient.

"What?" he asked sharply. "Shagging; casting spells; leaving; feeling like baying at the moon?"

Dudley stood there for a moment with his mouth open.

"Together?" he finally finished.

It was not a question Draco ever expected a member of Harry's family to ask.

"Yes," he said in a put upon tone. "Why, did your parents try and pretend that we're just friends?"

Surprisingly Dudley nodded and the way the boy actually appeared to have a thought in his head intrigued Draco. However, when the Muggle did not appear to have anything else to say, he dismissed him from his mind and went about making himself and Harry sandwiches. Draco had never actually made a sandwich before he came to the Dursley's. He had eaten them of course, but they had always been made by house elves and, if asked, Draco would have had to admit that he'd never even considered how they were constructed. Hence Harry had described his creations as 'interesting', although his lover had not objected to Draco making any more. Draco started putting ingredients together almost as if he was making a potion and he totally forgot that Dudley was there.

"How did you know you were gay?" the question came as such a shock that the emotion actually made it to Draco's face before he could stop it.

He looked at Dudley in surprise, putting the knife down where he had just cut the second sandwich in two.

"Pardon?" he said eventually, wanting to make sure he had heard correctly.

"How did you know you were gay?" Dudley repeated quietly.

Draco had the sudden urge to laugh, but managed to sit on it when he realised it was a serious question.

"I didn't," the young wizard found himself answering truthfully.

Dudley looked confused.

"I have never bothered to consider the question," Draco clarified his statement. "If I want something I tend to just reach out and take it, which includes people. I snogged my first girl when I was eleven and my first boy when I was twelve: it didn't really bother me either way."

This honesty caused Dudley to just stand there with the word 'Oh' on his lips, but not actually saying anything. It finally occurred to Draco that the silence might never be broken if he left it to the Muggle.

"Why did you want to know?" he asked evenly. "Do you think you might be gay?"

Dudley shook his head vigorously and started blathering something about a friend, but Draco didn't believe him for a second. For a start he doubted Dudley had any friends he would care that much about.

"You don't lie very well," Draco said eventually when the stream of denials ran dry. "Muggle," he continued pointedly, "if this wasn't bothering you, you'd never

have plucked up the courage to talk to me. Now that I am here and I have decided not to turn you into a toad, take the opportunity for what it is. Why do you think you might be gay?"

Draco was actually at a loss as to why he was allowing this conversation to continue; he could only assume Harry's bad habits were rubbing off on him. Dudley did not reply for sometime.

"There's this boy at college," the Muggle finally began, "and I sort of had a dream about him."

"And you think that might make you gay," Draco was stating a fact not asking a question, but Dudley nodded anyway. "Okay, when you," he almost went for the crudest expression he could find, but then decided that would be lowering himself to Dudley's level, "play with yourself, do you fantasise about girls, boys or both?"

Dudley was doing the staring thing again, but it looked as if he was actually thinking about his answer.

"Girls," he concluded eventually.

"Never boys?" Draco wanted to make absolutely sure that the slow-witted Muggle had not missed the point.

Dudley shook his head.

"Congratulations, you're straight," he said and picked up the sandwiches he had made. "The dream was just that; a dream, welcome to the truth about puberty, if a bit late. Now good night, please never speak to me again."

Without waiting for a response, Draco turned with his burden and walked back towards the stairs. Only when he had opened the door to Harry's room, gone in and closed it again did he speak.

"I think I'm scarred for life," he said and put the sandwiches down on the desk.

Harry looked up questioningly from where he was reading yet another book about Quidditch.

"Your cousin thought he might be gay," Draco explained with a grimace, "and I now have mental images I never imagined."

"Don't share," Harry said quickly and he was only half joking. "Dudley, gay? I wouldn't believe it unless I saw it."

Harry made a face.

"Oh hell," he said shortly, "I think I just found my own mental images."

The pair looked at each other with matching grimaces.

"Memory charm?" they both said at the same time.

====

The last day was quite a relief when it came round and Draco gladly packed his things back into his trunk. The rest had been good for Harry, but Draco had taken

it upon himself to shield his lover from his family no matter what, and it hadn't been quite so much of a rest for him. It had only taken him a matter of hours to despise Harry's relatives and he would be very glad if he never saw them again.

Draco felt the spike of alarm first and then heard the crash from downstairs. Harry had gone down to say goodbye to the Muggles against his lover's wishes: his soul mate confused him sometimes, Harry still insisted on being polite. Something had happened downstairs and Draco knew who was going to get the blame before he heard Vernon Dursley's loud recriminations. He felt his face set in a grim expression and he walked towards the door, ready to go and extract Harry from whatever trouble the Muggles had created.

It was when Draco felt the surge of anxiety and confusion in his lover that he forgot anything about being civil.

[Draco, help!] Harry sounded desperate.

Without even thinking, Draco was out the door so fast that he almost pulled it off its hinges. He flew down the stairs and went over the bottom banister, jumping and bracing himself with one hand rather than making his way to the bottom. He raced through the kitchen door and came to a halt with his wand trained on Vernon Dursley, who had Harry pinned against the sideboard with a hand on each of his nephew's arms.

"Get away from him," Draco yelled across the room, unsure of how his wand had made it into his hand, but knowing that he would use it if necessary.

He could feel Harry trying to shut out the raging emotions coming from his uncle and he tried to lend his mental support, but his first priority was getting the slug away from his soul mate. The Muggle seemed far too gone in his rage to obey Draco's command and, although his wife gave a scream at seeing a wizard with wand in hand, the man did not move.

"Dissendium," Draco said forcefully, casting at the large man and the Muggles hand flew off Harry's arms, "Mobilicorpus," Draco followed up his first spell with a second and then swiped his wand viciously in the opposite direction from Harry.

His lover's uncle was yanked backwards as if on a rope and ended up crashing into the counter between the kitchen and the dining room. Draco covered the distance between himself and Harry in a heartbeat and put his arm around his soul mate as Harry tried to reassert his equilibrium after the rage Dursley had thrown at him. Draco let his mind connect with Harry's, but he did not take his eyes off the Muggles.

"You'll be expelled for that," the slug of a man yelled at the top of his voice, "I know how this works."

Draco turned his glare onto the Muggle and let his fury blaze in his features. When he was annoyed he could be scary, when he was completely furious he knew he was terrifying, and Draco watched as his anger had an effect on the raging Dursley.

"You worthless piece of detritus," he said, his voice cold and merciless, "you don't know anything."

If Draco hadn't needed to keep a steady grip on Harry he would have taken a step towards the centre of his wrath. He was so angry he wanted to do damage.

"I can do anything I need to, to defend Harry," he said icily, "he is my soul mate and I am his protector. No one hurts him, and that includes you."

"Underage wizards may not perform magic ..." the man did not seem to gather quite how angry Draco was and was obviously used to getting his own way.

"We're not underage and he's not a normal wizard you complete idiot," he exploded, so infuriated that he lost any control he had left, "didn't that much get through to you. You think Hogwarts normally condones its pupils sleeping together?"

The look in Dursley's eyes told Draco that that it was exactly what the Muggle had assumed, which did not improve the his mood.

"What Harry is has never existed before," Draco said, his voice returning to dangerously cold, "and he's the best chance my world and your world have of surviving the decade. The nephew you think is a worthless nobody is the greatest wizard we have and if we fall you can kiss your safe little existence goodbye."

He was ready to do something very nasty and Draco hadn't felt like that in a long time. He was almost shaking with rage when a waterfall of calm washed over him. It was so sudden and it took his breath away.

[They're not worth it, Love,] Harry's voice sounded in his mind and Draco turned to face his soul mate. [They will never understand, let it go.]

[How can you not hate them?] Draco asked, unable to reason how his lover could put up with his relatives.

[I don't care enough about them anymore to hate,] Harry said calmly.

Harry's shock was gone and his shields were firmly in place: he looked and felt serene and Draco did not know where his soul mate found the inner strength.

[You,] Harry said silently to his unasked question, [my strength is you.]

"We're leaving," Harry said evenly and looked at his uncle, "I doubt you'll ever see us again."

Draco glared at the now silent Muggle and then Harry steered him out the door. They finished packing and left the house in less than ten minutes.

Chapter 31 Defence

There were still five minutes to go before Hilde was supposed to arrive, but Harry couldn't help feeling a little impatient. It was their first session since the incident with his uncle and he was still bothered by his inability to protect himself from his relative's wrath. The fact that he had frozen and needed Draco to extract him from trouble had been preying on his mind. It wasn't that he minded being rescued, it was that if he ever ended up in combat his soul mate could easily end up dead because he was trying to extricate Harry. Being unable to defend himself was as unacceptable as being unable to Apparate. Unfortunately the knowledge on how to overcome the first problem was nowhere near as easy to come by, as it had been to find the solution to the second.

Draco was running his fingers over the back of Harry's neck in a soothing manner as they sat in the room of requirement waiting for Hilde. His soul mate chose not to voice whatever he was thinking about, but Harry knew Draco was somewhat worried about Harry's reaction to the incident. He knew he had a tendency to brood and when they had had no luck looking for a solution themselves that is what he had begun to do, but it was difficult to curb his instinctive reaction. Harry hoped Hilde would have some kind of response for them. The owl Harry had sent his tutor explaining the situation had not been answered, but it had only been two days.

Harry was so lost in his own worries that when the door opened and Hilde walked in with her usual exuberance and cheerful expression the young man actually jumped.

"Good evening," she greeted brightly and placed her oversized bag down on the desk.

If he hadn't been so worried Harry probably would have grinned and returned the greeting, as it was he tried not to frown at her. He could not help feeling anxious: he had thought that he was capable of coping with the world by himself and his Uncle's actions had proved that he was as helpless as he had been at the beginning.

"Hello, Hilde," Draco greeted for both of them. "You seem to be in a very good mood this evening."

"I am," the woman admitted and then Harry found himself on the end of one of her appraising looks. "This is really bothering you isn't it, Harry?"

That had to be the understatement of the year, but Harry nodded anyway. Hilde left her bag where she had placed it and walked over before stopping in front of Harry and looking him straight in the eye.

"You have such high expectations of yourself," she said with an exasperated sigh. "Harry, do you have any idea how much learning you and Draco have squeezed into half a year?"

Harry did not have time to respond since Hilde continued almost immediately.

"Twelve years," she said firmly. "The pair of you mastered the basics in two weeks, even Hecatemae who have been trained since birth usually give it a month before they are ready to return to their lives. Since then you have progressed from simple techniques to those that are supposed to take years to master. Harry, you need to give yourself some credit."

“But I was helpless,” he said pointedly as all his anxiety leapt to the forefront of his mind. “We don’t have the luxury of time. If Voldemort makes his move and all he has to do is touch me to take me down we are finished.”

Hilde appeared a little exasperated at his response and she stood back with her hands on her hips appraising him again.

“I knew you’d say that,” she said and shook her head with a resigned smile.

“You found something didn’t you,” Draco observed from where he was leaning close to Harry.

The woman nodded and Harry felt some of his worry flow away: Hilde appeared quietly confident.

“I may not have been a Ravenclaw,” the Ministry employee said with a flourish, “but I can research with the best of them. Now you will probably not be surprised to hear that Hecatemae do not usually engage in battle, but there have been a few in the past who have had the role forced upon them. Close physical contact is a problem for anyone sensitive to the emotions and magic of others, and there are techniques to combat it. Since I doubt very much anyone could come close to either of you if you had your wands in your hands the particular method I suggest we concentrate on for the moment is wandless defence.”

Now Harry was listening very hard.

“It is not a procedure which is normally taught,” Hilde continued and walked back to her bag, “as it is difficult to pick up and more difficult to control. Aurors learn it, but they are about the only section of wizard society where you are likely to find the skill.”

The dark haired woman pulled a large book from her bag and placed it on the desk.

“There are only three books on the subject, all controlled by the Ministry as to how they are reproduced and who is allowed to see them,” Hilde said with a victorious smile. “This is one of them and I talked the Auror training school out of it. I have also talked one of the instructors into teaching me how to train someone in the technique and I should be up to speed in a couple of weeks. As for now, you both have some reading to do.”

Harry looked at the book and then shared an expression with his lover: it was a very big tome.

“When do we start?” he asked eventually and Hilde gave him a big smile.

“Now,” she said cheerfully and dumped the heavy book in his lap.

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The wild wand was similar to a normal wand only in that it could be used to focus power. Whereas the magic used to create a normal spell usually came from the channel that was the caster, the magic inherent in the wild wand was that which was used when employing the crystalline structure. Hence the power had to be bent to the wizard's will without having passed through him first and was far more erratic than normal. It was, however, also pure, which meant it had none of

its potential leached away. Raw power and less than perfect control were not a good combination and hence Harry had taken to practising with the wand well away from people and anything else breakable, including Draco. His lover always kept a mental eye on him when he was working with the wand, but Draco had agreed to stay away physically unless something went wrong.

Starting from first principles the young man had returned to the simple spells he had been taught when he first attended Hogwarts. On the initial try with the wand he had borrowed a feather from Professor Flitwick and found somewhere very quiet to see if he could levitate it. The smouldering husk which had been the entire earthly remains of the innocent feather after Harry's first attempt to use the wand had been a good indication that starting simple was the best way forward. Now, about three and a half months later, he was up to banishing charms and the like.

Focusing magic using the wild wand was a very different experience to using his normal wand. When Harry held his eleven inches of holly and phoenix feather it felt like he was extending himself, with the Christmas present Draco had given him it was much more a feeling of incorporating something alien into himself. The Gryffindor had learnt pretty quickly that forcing his will onto the wand and brashly trying to command resulted in the dangerous and unexpected. To control the power in the wand he had to understand it and feel its inherently raw nature before he could mould it to the path he had chosen for it. It was somewhere between letting the power take over him and using brute strength against the wild force he was trying to use.

Harry was not sure what he looked like when he used the wand, but he had a feeling it was not quite normal. When he opened himself to the power in the wand the Gryffindor could feel it travel across his skin as if getting to know him, and Harry had a feeling it was not an invisible phenomenon. The only time someone had stumbled upon him, the poor Ravenclaw fifth year had screamed and run all the way back to her common room if what Professor Flitwick had had to say was anything to go by. These days he locked himself in an empty classroom before trying anything.

Feeling at ease with the wand in his hand, Harry formed the words of the banishing charm in his mind and pulled the power flowing from the device to his will. It was less than a negotiation, but more than an order as the magic reared to the Gryffindor's control. Having what he wanted to do clearly in his mind, Harry spoke the words of the spell and flicked his wrist at the pillow he had appropriated for the purpose. The feather-stuffed soft furnishing sped across the room like a bullet and tried its best to make a dent in the wall, but being on the squidgy side merely flattened and fell to the floor.

"More control," Harry muttered to himself and, rather than attempting to summon the cushion back, decided it was safer to walk across the room and pick it up.

Being hit in the face by a speeding mass of material was not his idea of a fun thing to do and so the manual method was far less dangerous. Magic was energy, energy wizards and witches and their brethren could channel and use; that was what Harry had always been taught, but using the wild wand he couldn't help thinking that it was not that simple. It was almost as if the untamed power in the crystal had a rudimentary mind of its own and using it was more a matter of cooperation than simple focus.

Just performing a spell did not work, well at least not without unforeseen ramifications, and Harry had to be very precise about what he wanted. He had a sneaking suspicion that the words of the charms he had tried so far had very little to do with the outcome and it was the focus of thought that was working, but so far the young man hadn't had the guts to try anything outside the patterns he was used to.

Sitting down again Harry placed the cushion back on the table and constructed the whole exercise in his mind a little more precisely. High speed banishing charms could be very useful, but if he didn't want to damage the item he was sending away then control was the order of the day. Dropping into communion with the wand he spoke the words of the spell a second time and flicked his wrist, at which point the cushion sailed into the air in a graceful arc, coming to rest just in front of the far wall.

Harry couldn't help smiling at his success, but he wasn't stupid enough to summon the cushion back just yet and stood up again. It was as he went to step round the table that he felt the familiar prickling up his spine and crawling under his skin that announced he was about to have a guest. Throwing up his mental barriers with practiced efficiency Harry placed the wild wand back in its case and sat down, concentrating hard on not succumbing to the presence of his godfather.

[Everything all right?] Draco's metal voice sounded in his head instantly.

[Sirius,] Harry replied with only a little trepidation in his voice, [I'm okay.]

[I'll be there in a couple of minutes,] his soul mate replied quickly.

For a moment Harry was grateful for Draco's reaction and then some of his Gryffindor courage kicked in and he made a split second decision.

[No,] he sent to his soul mate, [don't worry. I'd like to try this on my own, if that's okay.]

There was no reply from Draco at first but the general feeling coming from the Slytherin was scepticism.

[Are you sure?] his lover asked eventually, concern obvious in his tone.

[I think so,] Harry replied without trying to hide that he was not completely convinced, [but I'd like to try. You can always make like the cavalry if I have a problem.]

[Hah, all I am these days is a bloody rescue team,] Draco replied with an amused feeling overlaying his concern.

[But a very dashing one,] Harry replied with a smile to himself and then focused back on the task of keeping himself together against the onslaught of his godfather's presence.

When a blurry shape slowly coalesced into the form of Sirius, Harry was looking directly at him, and the young man smiled as his godfather resolved. There was still part of him that was nervous about seeing Sirius and blamed himself for the wizard's death, but they had resolved that issue the last time in so far as it was likely to be resolved in the near future and Harry was pleased to see his godfather again.

"Hello, Snuffles," he said with a warm smile, "long time no see."

For a moment the older man appeared rather surprised by Harry's attitude, but Sirius soon smiled.

"Hello, Harry," the animagus said lightly, "have I missed anything interesting?"

The past few weeks ran through Harry's mind in a rush and one event rather stood out, but for the moment he put it aside; they had not had a chance to talk about the visions about Draco last time Sirius had appeared, but Harry did not want to talk about that then.

"Draco has plans to lure the Slytherins over to our side," the young man said, choosing his second subject of choice. "As unlikely as it may seem I think he has a chance as well."

"What brought this on?" Sirius asked and moved towards his godson as if they were having a perfectly normal conversation.

"Oh, he's had plans from the first," Harry replied calmly. "You know Slytherins; can't resist a bit of intrigue; after they tried to hex him and some other stuff, my soul mate decided it was time to go into action."

He knew that he was very bad at lying to those he loved, especially when he was trying to glaze over things and Harry hoped he had managed it this time. From the speculative look in Sirius' eye the young man was not sure how well he had done, but to his relief his godfather blinked and smiled again.

"Now the machinations of the tame Slytherin mind are something I would like to see," the man said with a grin.

"Tame!" Harry exclaimed with a laugh. "If you think Draco is even remotely tame, you haven't seen enough of him on your visits. He's corrupting most of my house."

At which point the young wizard launched into examples of exactly how his lover was about as far from tame as it was possible to be. Sirius began commenting in a way Harry remembered from the time they had spent together in Grimauld place and for a while he almost forgot he was not speaking to a living human being. Time flew past, but slowly Harry became more and more aware that Sirius was not what he appeared to be. The wrongness the young man felt in his godfather's presence began to make itself known and an ache started behind Harry's eyes. Eventually he ran his fingers up under his glasses and squeezed the bridge of his nose in an effort to relieve the pressure.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Sirius asked sympathetically, breaking out of the story he was telling about one of his run ins with the Slytherin's of his era.

The desire to brush off the incident and continue the conversation as if nothing had happened rose in Harry, but when he looked into his godfather's eyes he realised the man deserved the truth.

"I have to put up another mental barrier to block out your energy," the Hecatemus said slowly, "I'm not used to it yet and some gets through. I have a bit of a headache."

"Maybe I should go," Sirius suggested immediately, standing up from where he appeared to be perching on the table.

It momentarily occurred to Harry to wonder how his godfather did that if he could pass through doors and the like, but it was rather overruled by another stabbing pain through his temples.

"Okay, that does it," Sirius decided firmly, "I'm going. I'll be back when I can."

"Wait," Harry said instantly, "our meetings always seem to get cut short, and it's all my fault. How much longer can you stay?"

Sirius did not look happy, but Harry gave his godfather his best puppy dog expression.

"Probably another couple of hours," the man said eventually, but frowned none the less, "but I will not be responsible for injuring you."

"I'll be fine," Harry promised faithfully, "I just haven't had enough practise. Give me a little break and the headache will be gone."

An idea suddenly occurred to the Hecatemus and he smiled.

"You're so interested in Slytherins," he continued cheerfully, "why don't you go and get to know Draco properly. I can go and have a lie down and then I could join you both later."

Sirius appeared thoughtful although his frown cleared and then his face broke into a smile.

"Are you sure he won't bottle me and use me in some despicable plan?" the older wizard said lightly.

"Best be on your guard," Harry said with mock sincerity, "you can never tell."

"See you in a while then," Sirius said lightly and just like a good Gryffindor Harry's godfather leapt straight in to the idea and vanished.

Harry was left looking at thin air and shaking his head with a small smile.

[Draco,] he sent silently in a bid to warn his lover what was coming, but the sense of shock from the other end of the bond showed him that he was too late.

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Draco looked up from where he was writing an essay for Professor McGonagall and came face to face with Sirius Black. Much to his chagrin he managed to knock his, thankfully, sealed bottle of ink off the library desk as he jumped in surprise. The man had the gall to grin at him and Draco scowled and bent to pick up the fallen item.

[Thank you so much for the warning,] he sent to his lover in an unimpressed manner.

[Sorry,] Harry's apologetic response came back instantly, [when I suggested he come and see you I didn't think he'd just vanish.]

There was an underlying feeling of fatigue and discomfort coming from his lover which made Draco pause in his expression of his displeasure. Concern made itself known and he almost forgot about the fact that Sirius Black was standing only a few feet away.

[You're hurting,] Draco said slowly.

[It's just a headache,] Harry promised faithfully, [and I'm going to go and have a lie down. That's why I sent Sirius to you, and then I can come and see you both when I feel better.]

[And you felt that I would enjoy the company of your godfather, why?] Draco asked dryly, but he really didn't mind, in fact getting to know Sirius was something he meant to do sooner rather than later.

[Because you love me,] Harry replied sweetly which made Draco laugh and the young man snapped back to his current situation to find his lover's godfather with his eyebrows raised.

"Talking to Harry?" Sirius asked, sounding genuinely interested.

Draco nodded and then schooled his features into a polite smile: he was not quite sure how to interact with Sirius Black since the last time he had remained in the background, and he was not clear exactly how the man thought of him. The expression on Sirius' face was friendly and cheerful, but Draco decided to wait and see: he had heard many things about the man, before and after he bonded with Harry.

"I was scolding him for not warning me you were coming," the Slytherin said lightly. "Do you make a habit of trying to scare your godson's friends to death?"

"Only the first couple of times I meet them," Sirius replied with a grin.

"That's all right then," Draco replied dryly, "I think it's rather bad manners to hex family."

That made the man laugh and the Slytherin found himself looking around to see if anyone heard and then mentally kicked himself as he realised he was the only one who could hear the other side of the conversation. No matter how Black had arrived he looked so solid that for a moment Draco had forgotten the man was dead.

"Maybe we should take this somewhere more private," Draco decided quickly with a glance around the library, "I have no wish to be observed talking to myself."

And with that he began to pack up his things, trying to think of the best place to go. It being a weekend, he decided that an empty classroom was his best bet. As he stood he noted Sirius looking at him in an amused fashion, but the man made no objection when Draco moved towards the exit.

"The transfiguration classroom shouldn't have anyone in it this afternoon," the Slytherin said as they made their way into the corridor. "No clubs or extra-curricular activities in there today."

"Well none that you know about, anyway," Sirius replied suggestively.

Draco came to the stunning conclusion that Harry's godfather had a more one track mind than he did.

"Oh please, the transfiguration classroom has been out of fashion for that since the Charms room was refurbished and they added new heating charms," the Slytherin replied and led the way to their destination.

It didn't take them long to traverse the school corridors and very quickly Draco was locking the door of the empty classroom.

"So what is it that's bothering Harry that he won't tell me?" Sirius asked openly as soon as the Slytherin was finished.

"Isn't that between you and Harry?" Draco replied evenly, unwilling to discus something that his lover was not.

Harry's godfather appeared thoughtful at this and sat on one of the desks still thinking.

"Under normal circumstances I'd say yes," Sirius replied honestly, "but I don't have a lot of time. We were talking about you and your plans for the Slytherins and there was something behind your reasoning that he didn't want to mention. Knowing Harry it's something important, and I'd like to be prepared if I'm going to find myself summoned."

It was a reasonable argument, but going against his lover's wishes was not something Draco would do unless he had a very good reason.

"Just a minute," the young man said evenly and turned his attention to his soul mate.

[Harry,] Draco called silently, [why don't you want Sirius to know about the prophecies?]

There was silence for a while, but from the feelings coming from the Hecatemus, Draco knew his lover was not ignoring him.

[I didn't want to worry him,] Harry finally admitted. [I suspected he knew I was holding something back, but I thought he'd decided to leave it.]

[I think it might be a good idea to tell him,] Draco replied honestly. [If Sirius really is attracted to you when you're in trouble he may need to know.]

Silence reigned again and the young man could feel the conflicted emotions coming from Harry, but he knew what his lover was going to say before Harry finally replied.

[Okay,] Harry said reluctantly, [but I should be there.]

[Not on your life,] Draco said firmly, [you're going to lie down. I'll tell him, and you can talk to him about it when you're feeling better.]

There was a surge of rebellious feeling along the link, but it faded as fast as it arrived to be replaced by discomfort: Harry's head was still bothering him even though he was no longer in contact with his godfather.

[Fine,] Harry said sulkily after a few moments, [but don't let him try and do anything stupid.]

[Harry Love,] Draco said gently, [he's dead, there's not a lot he can do to make anything worse.]

Harry did not reply and Draco sent a mental hug at his lover before turning his attention back to Sirius.

"Harry has agreed," Draco said in a much lighter tone than he felt. "If you must know, your godson has launched into the world of prophesying the future. Just before your last visit Harry had two visions, both of which boil down to the fact that my father is going to attempt to remove me from the current equation. It wasn't exactly a new idea, but it brought certain things to my attention, so I decided that it was time to bring enlightenment to my house mates."

Sirius looked surprised and opened his mouth before closing it again and thinking for a while.

"Let me get this straight," the man said slowly. "Harry had visions which indicate danger to you, and your reaction is to try and convince the rest of the Slytherins that Voldemort is not the way they should go?"

Draco nodded.

"The more who end up on my side the fewer there are to help my father," he replied calmly.

Sirius was silent for some time again.

"You really are a complete Slytherin," Harry's godfather said eventually.

"Thank you," Draco said with a smile and prepared for the onslaught of questions he knew was coming.

Chapter 32 No Longer Frightening

Defence Against the Dark Arts was undoubtedly Harry's favourite lesson and of course his best subject. Everyone knew this from all the members of the DA up to and including all the Slytherins who in the sixth and seventh years shared the classroom for the discipline. Harry could only think that this was the reason he found himself at the front of the class with everyone else arranged behind him when Professor Daemon announced that they were doing some practical revision today.

The subject of the moment was boggarts. For the NEWTs the pupils were often up against more powerful and dangerous creatures, but some of the discipline was to handle the less lethal possibilities in a more professional and efficient manner; hence the revisit to boggarts, which hadn't been much of an issue since the third year.

"This should be easy for you, Harry," Professor Daemon said cheerfully as she took hold of the door of the shipping crate which held the creature, "show the other's how it's done."

The problem was Harry didn't really know what was going to come out of the box. At the beginning of the year he would have said positively that it would have been a Dementor: the creatures still filled him with terror because of what they could do to him even though he had a strong patronus; but he was no longer so sure. There was a nasty suspicion at the back of his mind that one of two things would pop out of the crate: a vengeful Sirius Black, even though at a conscious level Harry knew his godfather did not blame him for his death; or a dead Draco.

With a deep breath, Harry gripped his wand and steeled himself at which point the professor opened the crate. For a moment he just stared, his mouth open and his wand remained motionless in his hand and then he felt the smile creep onto his face. The boggart blinked at him and stepped forward at which point Harry couldn't help himself: he laughed. There was a cloudy, indistinct shape hanging around the creature, but there was one thing no one had told the Hecatemus; he could see the real boggart.

From the gasp that had escaped the class Harry was pretty sure that they could see whatever had turned out to be his greatest fear, but he couldn't even tell what it was; all he could see was a quite ridiculous sight. The laughter bubbled out of him partly from relief and partly because quite frankly the boggart was hilarious.

"Harry, you didn't cast yet," Professor Daemon sounded somewhat perturbed by the situation.

"Um," Harry tried to control the laughter, but it was getting away from him; the boggart blinked at him again and for all the world appeared offended. "This high," Harry tried to explain and waved his arm at about knee height while gasping for breath, "pink!"

Then he dissolved in another fit of giggles. The boggart was an ugly little creature, but it was no more than a foot and a half tall and any nastiness it might have had thanks to its features was offset by the fact that it was bright pink.

[Harry,] Draco's voice sounded confused, [you're looking at a mutilated, very dead me and you're laughing your arse off. Have you lost it?]

Rather than replying Harry sent his soul mate an image of what he was looking at.

[Oh,] was the Slytherin's prompt response which caused Harry to laugh even harder: Draco almost sounded insulted.

[It's pink,] Harry sent back, which was the part that his brain refused to move past.

Harry managed a glance at the class and they all appeared to think he was deranged if their expressions were anything to go by, but he just couldn't stop laughing. The fact that the entire wizarding world was afraid of boggarts which were in truth bright pink, was completely absurd. He wanted to explain, he really did, but he could not form the words. Since Draco's worried expression had cracked into a grin and was rapidly forming into a forerunner for a fit of the giggles, Harry did not think he would be gaining any help from that direction.

It was a little hard to breathe as the laughter kept coming, almost like he was under a tickling charm. It occurred to Harry that his instincts knew the best defence against the boggart and were not about to let him stop until it was gone. After this thought it occurred to him that the more people who were laughing the quicker this would be over and that was all his peculiar mind required to come up with a solution.

There was a mirror on the professor's desk and, following the rather abstract idea in his mind, Harry pointed his wand as it and cast a revealing charm with a twist. The mirror turned helpfully towards the boggart so that the creature was reflected in it and for a moment the class stood there completely stunned by what they were seeing. Harry didn't need to wait long to find out that whatever he had done to the mirror had worked; Neville was the first break down and within a minute the whole class was laughing. The boggart didn't stand a chance and it went up in smoke like so much firewood doused in lamp oil.

"Thank you, Harry," Professor Daemon said as the minor bout of hysteria the class seemed to be undergoing began to pass, "ten points to Gryffindor. I think that is the most interesting solutions to a boggart I have ever seen."

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Harry stood in the middle of the room of requirement looking around himself dubiously; it was almost completely bare and the walls were padded. It was the last fact which was somewhat disconcerting. The young wizard had a suspicion he knew why Hilde had sent them a note changing the location of their weekly meeting, and the state of the walls was backing up this suspicion; today they would be beginning wandless defence.

The book on the subject had been long and mostly boring, but both Harry and Draco had finished reading it in under a week. The only thing that had been stopping them after that point was Hilde's unwillingness to teach anything she had not researched very thoroughly. Harry could sympathise, but he had been becoming a little impatient over the last week or so.

"Good evening, Gentlemen," Hilde greeted grandly as she strode through the door.

She may have been a petite woman, but as soon as she entered a room she seemed to fill it and Harry found himself smiling despite his curiosity.

"Wandless defence?" Draco asked before Hilde even had a chance to put down the bag she habitually carried.

Coming to a halt the woman put her hands on her hips and gave a mock pout comparable to the Slytherin's when he was trying to wheedle something out of Harry.

"Oh poo," she said dramatically, "now you've ruined my surprise. What gave it away; I thought I was being so subtle?"

Harry laughed and Draco waltzed up to Hilde, sunk down on one knee and bowed his head.

"Mademoiselle," he said grandly, "can you ever forgive me?"

At which point Hilde dissolved in a fit of giggles and Draco stood back up again.

"Harry, save me," she said between laughs, "your soul mate is trying to steal my scene."

"Ah, Dear Lady," the Slytherin responded and rose to his feet, "that would be impossible."

Sometimes Harry wondered if his lover was related to thespians since he could carry off any character, if somewhat over the top. As it was, Harry trotted over to where the other two were standing and slipped his arm round Draco's waist with a cheerful grin on his face.

"So you finally know all you need to know to teach us?" he asked enthusiastically.

"Well, not at much as I'd like," Hilde replied cheerfully, "but you know me, that could take years. Bryan finally managed to fit me in for an intensive training session last week, so at least I know how to not damage any of us."

Harry was still having trouble picturing an Auror named Bryan; it just didn't seem like a wizarding name. From the way Hilde described her friend, as with all people that started out as acquaintances of the woman, the instructor was now forever a friend, he could be anything from a six foot five mountain of a man to a five foot nothing master of magic; she was never very clear with the details.

"So when do we start?" Harry asked brightly, trying to distract himself from the bizarre thoughts about his teacher's friends.

"As soon as you tell me who wants to go first," Hilde replied in her usual bubbly manner.

The soul mates exchanged a glance and Harry knew exactly what Draco was going to say before he voiced it.

[I'll go first,] the Slytherin said, having lost the playful air he had had only seconds before, [that way you can watch and make sure there's nothing that's going to be a problem for you.]

Logical as always, Harry could not fault his lover's argument even if he was impatient to try out the theory they had been going over for the last few weeks. Rather than replying verbally he just nodded.

"That would be me then," Draco said calmly, turning back to Hilde. "Where do you want me?"

[Anywhere and everywhere,] Harry couldn't resist the silent comment.

That earned him a raised eyebrow and Hilde was grinning like a loon so she had undoubtedly guessed what the pair was up to.

"Centre of the mat please, Draco," she told the Slytherin in a perfectly innocent tone. "Harry, if you wouldn't mind standing over by the door. In case of accidents there will be some wards going up around the central area, so don't worry if you see them flaring into life."

The two young men nodded and moved to their respective places. Harry wanted to see exactly how the whole procedure worked and since Draco had basically volunteered to be a guinea pig, he was not about to waste the opportunity. Leaning against the wall, Harry lowered his mental shields to a level where the magic in the room was faintly covering his normal view of the world and then he waited for whatever was going to take place.

In the centre of the room Hilde pulled out her wand and flicked it to the right, speaking a couple of words Harry did not catch. Suddenly he was blinded as bright metallic colours flared in his vision and his hands went to shield his eyes automatically.

"Harry?" Draco sounded instantly worried and Harry held up his hand in a gesture to say he was okay.

"Just very bright," he explained and blinked, trying to clear the luminous spots that were now in front of his eyes, "I'm fine."

When he could finally see again he found himself looking at his lover through an intricate web of power and for just a second something flared inside Harry causing his heart to beat faster. A feeling deep at the centre of him almost caused him to panic and he had stood away from the wall and taken a step towards the barrier between himself and Draco before he could stop himself.

"Is everything okay, Harry?" Hilde asked in a serious, but gentle tone. "I'll take down the wards again if they're bothering you. We don't have to do this now."

The instinctive reply that leapt to his lips was to say yes and ask the woman to remove the barrier between himself and his soul mate, but common sense won through. It was a basic instinct on being separated from Draco by anything, Harry had felt it before when the pair had returned to their separate houses that first day out of the hospital wing, and he knew he could deal with it.

"It's okay," he said, taking a calming breath. "It's just a bit strange having something like that between us. Go ahead."

Draco was giving him a thoughtful look, but eventually his soul mate turned away, back to Hilde.

"Ready?" the woman asked, her air of excitement returning as the perceived crisis was averted.

With a bob of his white blond head Draco signalled his willingness to begin and the pair stepped up to each other in the middle of the wards so that they were side on to Harry.

"Right," Hilde said in a very businesslike manner that she tended to adopt when teaching, "place you hands like this on mine."

She lifted her arms and held out her hands, palms towards Draco, who mirrored the gesture and placed his fingers against Hilde's.

"Now, we'll start small," the woman said with a slight smile. "I'm sure you know the theory backwards by now, but as I discovered with Bryan, it's not quite how it sounds."

The serious expression on Draco's face indicated the level of his concentration and Harry tried to keep his mind very quiet so as not to distract his lover.

"Now technically you should be able to expel magic from any part of your body," Hilde continued to explain. "It's a matter of focusing where you want it to go and then pushing it out, but since all of us hold out wands in our hands normally, it's easiest to start there. I want you to visualise some of your magic pooling in your hands. Not too much to begin with, but enough to make your fingers tingle."

Draco nodded again and then fixed his eyes on his hands. It was quite difficult to make out anything specific through the barrier of the wards, but as he watched, Harry could sense more than exactly see his lover's power gathering in his palms and fingers.

"I can feel it," Draco said evenly.

"Okay," Hilde said calmly, "now push it out. Think of your hands in the same way as you'd use your wand and send the magic through them. Don't worry about anything like what the power should do when it is released just force it out."

A frown graced Draco's features as he concentrated firmly on his hands; it appeared to Harry as if the process of expelling the magic his lover had pooled was much more difficult than it sounded. Letting himself sink further into the experience with Draco, Harry focused on feeling what his soul mate was experiencing rather than just watching it from the outside. His brain rationalised the sensation as pushing against a wall; it was as if there was a barrier between Draco's magic and the outside world that refused to be breached.

Harry's mind worked around the problem as his lover continued to concentrate and Harry tried to picture in his head how magic looked coming out of a wand. Then suddenly it hit him as the peculiar image of a pin on the inside of a balloon made it into his head. Pushing a flat surface against an immovable flat surface was never going to work and Harry flashed his lover the mental image of the thousands of pores in his skin each being a tiny conduit. The acknowledgment came from Draco in a very direct manner, as Harry slipped back to his outside awareness and saw Hilde slide backwards a few feet.

Draco smiled triumphantly and sent Harry a glance and a non-verbal feeling of thanks.

"Very good," Hilde said brightly, "that took me four hours the first time. How did you do it? Bryan says it's different for every user. I have to imagine my whole body as a wand and the place I want to expel the energy from as the tip."

"Every pore is a tiny wand," Draco replied openly; "Harry's idea. I think his unique insight rather sped up the process."

"Well if you've got it, flaunt it," the brunette said cheerfully. "Want to try again?"

Draco nodded and Harry settled himself in to watch his lover practice.

Over the next ten minutes or so Draco managed to move Hilde away from him four times. The amount of movement and the speed at which she was pushed were never the same, but the woman assured the Slytherin that this was perfectly normal and control would come with practice. By the time Hilde looked over the where Harry was standing he was dying to have a go.

"Your turn, Harry," the woman said brightly and pulled out her wand to turn off the wards.

The soul mates walked past each other as they swapped roles and Harry couldn't help feeling a little excited. This would be a big step to becoming completely self sufficient and he was eager to take it. He had defended himself on instinct before, but instinct on other occasions had been his downfall, and this was a step to controlling his impulses. Putting his mental barriers back up to their normal level he waited patiently for Hilde to reset the wards and he couldn't help his grin of anticipation as she raised her hands to him, palm first.

"Okay, Harry," Hilde said calmly as he placed his palms against hers, "let the magic pool in your hands."

Feeling the currents of his inherent magic, Harry did as he was told and turned the flow to his extended limbs. His skin began to tingle almost instantly and he rather liked the sensation.

"Visualise it in your mind and once you have it firmly, push it out at me," the professor continued her teaching smoothly.

Harry did not need any constructed ideas of what magic looked like to visualise the whole experience since he could see it happening and he let his barriers to magic down slightly so he could view the power in his hands. It was as if his skin was almost translucent and colours moved underneath it. Without pausing Harry changed his perception of his hands from smooth, seamless skin to the more accurate idea of a porous membrane and then he pushed the power inside out. He was not expecting the result.

Unlike when Draco had forced his magic to the outside and it had felt almost reluctant to go, Harry's power jumped at his command and energy exploded out of him like a firework. Hilde gave a surprised squeal and went flying backwards as the force of the expulsion caught her in the shockwave, sending her sailing towards the wards. Harry's mouth opened in horror as he watched the woman arc through the air at quite a rate, but there was nothing he could do.

As Hilde hit the wards they expanded outwards around her back slowing her progress and bringing the woman to a gentle halt before resuming their original shape. For a moment it seemed as if the wards would leave Hilde suspended as she was, several feet off the ground, but as words of apology leapt to Harry's lips she was slowly lowered to the floor. Before Harry could babble out how sorry he was, Hilde's shocked expression turned into a broad smile.

"That was fun," she said brightly, much to Harry's surprise. "Ooh, let's do that again."

Chapter 33 Father and Son

Professor McGonagall had asked Harry to stay after the lesson for a few minutes. He had no idea what it was about, but Draco had received a note at breakfast asking him to meet Pansy on the other side of the school and had rushed off as soon as the Professor let them go. The corruption of the Slytherins as Draco referred to it was showing positive results after nearly two months of trying.

Harry was waiting patiently for his house head to finish explaining something to Seamus Finnegan when his mind exploded. The classroom faded out of his vision as Draco's anger and fear flooded into his head wiping away anything else. Someone had just cast a spell against his soul mate and Harry did not stop to consider his actions: without hesitation he opened up the link between himself and Draco almost completely and wrapped his lover in his mental presence. Acting on the same instinct Draco let him in and Harry was suddenly looking through the other youth's eyes. What he saw made his blood run cold: Lucius Malfoy was standing no more than ten feet from his son and he was holding his wand.

"Drawing your wand against your own father, Boy," Lucius said icily. "Tut, tut, I thought I brought you up properly."

Harry could feel Draco's hand stinging and he realised Lucius must have cast a disarming spell.

"You did," Draco hissed at his parent, "I should have been quicker."

This appeared to amuse the other man and his mouth curled into a smile.

"My, my," Lucius commented in a superior manner, "you can take a Malfoy out of the Death Eaters but you can't take the Death Eater out of a Malfoy."

Then he laughed at his own joke and Harry felt Draco's anger burn through him. It occurred to Harry that he needed to do something, to alert someone that this was happening on school grounds, but a dreadful instinct kept him from withdrawing from the link even slightly.

"You'll learn obedience, Boy," Lucius said coldly, the humour leaving his features, "and you'll bring Potter to his knees."

Then Draco's father lifted his wand.

"Imperio," he said viciously and Harry felt the curse flying towards his soul mate.

When it hit, the power tried to force him out of Draco's mind, replacing his presence with Lucius' will. Draco was used to obeying his father: he'd been brought up with Lucius as the authority figure and it was almost impossible for him to fight the Imperius curse from his parent. Harry became partially aware of his own body again, but the curse ignited a fury in him so deep that it almost scared him. He could feel Draco's mind desperately trying to hang on to him and he fought against the magic with equal ferocity.

"You can't have him, he's mine!" he heard himself yell and he was not sure if the words came out of Draco's mouth or his own.

The curse hurt as it twisted through his lover's mind and it tried to weaken the link between them. Harry knew he could not let this happen: he could not lose

Draco to his father's will. Without knowing exactly what he was doing, he let down his guards and grabbed at the closest raw magic he could find. Then he forced it down the bond between himself and Draco and used it like a club to beat at the curse trying to take hold of his soul mate. He felt Draco cry out at the force which invaded him, and he felt his lover fall to his knees, but the Imperius Curse shattered into a thousand magical pieces.

As the curse dissolved, the link between Harry and Draco slammed back into place and for a few moments it was like they were the same person. The division between them blurred as they clung to each other desperately and Harry could not think of anything more than holding on.

"Well, Boy, you are full of surprises," Lucius' voice made it into the muddle of joined thoughts and Draco looked up.

His father was sneering down at his son and Harry felt the cold touch of fear at the ice in the man's eyes.

"I suppose we'll just have to do this the hard way," he said cold-heartedly and lifted his wand again. "Crucio," he said calmly.

The agony that stabbed into every nerve ending was blinding. The power of the curse travelled through the completely open link and Harry felt his own body react as well as Draco's. They screamed in unison, locked together in excruciating pain, but hanging on to each other frantically.

[I love you, Harry,] Draco had somehow managed to find his mental voice and threw emotion and words at his other half.

Then Draco, his body already having been weakened by the battle against the Imperius curse, passed out and the pain ended. Harry slammed back into his own body and found himself curled into a foetal ball on the floor of the transfiguration classroom. His muscles ached with the memory of the Cruciatus Curse and he felt disconnected as if his mind was not quite ready to remember how to be just one person.

"Harry, Harry Potter, can you hear me, child?" he heard Professor McGonagall's anxious voice, but it took a few seconds for his brain to understand it.

Slowly he moved his head and looked at the woman who was hovering over him not daring to touch in case she hurt him. Harry wanted to scream at her, tell her what had happened, make her help, but it was so difficult. Draco was still close, he was still on the grounds, Harry could feel him even though his soul mate was unconscious, but he could not find his voice. He tried desperately to speak, but the words would not form and then suddenly Draco's presence dimmed in his mind. One moment Harry knew Draco was close and then he was distant.

Harry had not been separated from his soul mate by any distance since they had bonded and the shock caused him to gasp. It was almost more than he could take, but in a last desperate effort he blindly threw out his hand and grabbed the Professor's arm.

[Lucius Malfoy took Draco,] he threw the words directly at his housemistress' mind and her eyes opened in shock.

Then having used the last of his strength Harry slid ungracefully into darkness.

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As Harry's mind reached for consciousness it also automatically reached for Draco, but all it found was confusion. Panic threatened to take away sensible thought until he realised that the link was still there, it was just muddled. It was like looking through frosted glass: Harry could tell what was on the other side, but he could not make much sense out of it, or reach out to touch his other half. Acting on instinct he balled up his will and mentally threw himself against the barrier between himself and Draco. In return he felt a momentary flash of pain and the confused echo of the same in his lover.

The retaliation caused his body to convulse, which drew his mind's attention to his physical self. With a groan, he reluctantly opened his eyes and slowly focused on the very familiar ceiling of the private room he and Draco had shared in the hospital wing earlier in the school year.

The room was far too bright to his abnormal vision and he could see the magic in the wards all over the walls. Harry's barriers were completely down and he was very glad to find himself in the protected room. With long drilled habit he rebuilt the mental barricades before he thought about anything else: outside the room he was useless without them. Draco's vague presence in the back of his mind was a stabilising feature, but it took a lot of effort for Harry to put back the protection in his mind from scratch without the physical presence of his soul mate. Once the room looked normal he finally let himself think about what had happened.

Fear for Draco's safety almost consumed him, but he pushed himself off the bed, refusing to give in to the feelings of desperation. He was not alone in this and he was not going to give in to the despair that threatened. His whole body ached, but then he hadn't expected anything else after the curse Draco's father had used and Harry pushed the discomfort aside without thinking about it.

Someone had changed him into his pyjamas, so he slipped off the bed and walked to the cupboard in the corner. Changing into his clothes was not the fastest thing he had ever done, but then he was fighting off a bone aching weariness. The more he thought about what Lucius had done the more angry it made him, and by the time he pulled on his robe he wanted to hurt something, preferably Malfoy senior himself. When he glanced at himself in the mirror his expression held a grim determination and his eyes were bright green in his fury.

Walking to the door he reached for the handle and was not surprised to find it locked and sealed with a charm. It was doubtful anyone had expected him to wake up: from what he'd read about Hecatemae, with what Lucius was trying, Harry should have been about as useful as a broken wand, however, Harry had never played by the rules so he wasn't about to start now.

First he weakened his newly erected magical barrier until he could see the charm on the door. It was a complex charm to prevent anyone opening the door except with the key, but his peculiar vision showed that it hinged on one point and he reached out to touch the magic with his fingers. It was not difficult to untangle the web of power and disperse the energy back into the surroundings. Then he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the door.

"Alohomora," he said evenly and the lock clicked open obligingly.

Gripping the handle he pulled open the door the rest of the way and stepped into the corridor. The sun was low in the sky as he looked through one of the windows: he had been asleep for most of the day and his incapacitation added to

his anger. Without waiting for anyone to notice that he had woken up, he turned and headed straight towards Dumbledore's office.

On his way he met a group of pupils coming from the great hall and they divided like the Red Sea in front of him. Harry had a brief thought that maybe he looked a little scary as he saw the shocked looks on their faces, but it didn't stop his progress. In fact the only thing that did stop him was what he found when he entered Dumbledore's office: there appeared to be a meeting going on.

In front of the headmaster's desk was a host of people comprising of Snape, McGonagall, Ron, Hermione, Madame Pomfrey, Fred, George, Remus Lupin and Tonks. Harry was momentarily glad at the surprise of seeing his ex-defence against the dark arts professor and the now green haired Auror, but the emotion barely made it to, let alone past the fury that was keeping him going.

"Harry, My Boy," Dumbledore greeted with his usual smile, "we did not expect you to be awake so soon."

"Or ever?" Harry shot back and regretted it the moment it was out of his mouth, but quite unable to hold back his temper.

"Quite," the headmaster returned as if one of his pupils had not just bitten his head off, "please, join us."

"Harry, you're looking ..." Remus began as Harry walked towards the group, but seemed unable to come up with what he wanted to say.

"Very, very, angry?" the furious young man offered helpfully.

"Well I might have gone with avenging angel," Tonks commented conversationally, "but your description will do."

"Are you sure such raw emotion is good for you, Mr Potter?" Madame Pomfrey sounded genuinely concerned, but her tone did not improve Harry's mood.

The glare he turned on her made her eyes widen in shock and he tried to reign in his temper.

"Well you can have blithering wreck or blind anger, your choice," Harry said shortly. "Myself, I'm finding murderous rage far more productive at the moment."

The logical part of Harry's mind informed him that there would be some heartfelt apologies owing once this was over, but the rest of him didn't care.

"Well, Harry," Dumbledore interrupted smoothly, "we have been trying to ascertain what occurred this morning. Now that you are here would you care to tell us what you know?"

Having a purpose on which to focus was just what Harry needed and he took the lifeline for what it was. When their minds had combined the whole event had been at the forefront of Draco's mind, hence Harry knew everything his soul mate had seen.

"Lucius Apparated onto school grounds," Harry said evenly using the memory to channel his anger, "someone must have opened the wards for him. He wants to break Draco and then use him against me: it didn't seem to have occurred to him

that if Draco breaks so do I. Lucius cast Imperius on Draco, but it didn't work so he used Cruciatus on him instead and Apparated away."

"Can you tell where Draco is now?" Hermione had become the resident expert on Hecatemae since Harry's emergence and her question was a reasonable one: Harry should have been able to locate Draco over any distance.

"That way," he said and pointed, "somewhere, but I can't tell where."

"Does Draco know where he is?" Remus asked evenly.

"I don't know," Harry admitted and the fear for his partner almost made it through the anger, "there's something between us, a spell, I can't get through it. I know he's there, but I can't reach him."

"Dissaepio Iugum," Dumbledore said with a nod, "the curse carries the same penalty as the Killing Curse. It's only use is to try and separate Hecatemae soul mates and if it succeeds it has the same effect, but its results are reliant on the subjects on which it is inflicted. In this case I am sure we are all grateful it has had only a partial effect."

There was a murmur of consent from the rest of the room.

Harry felt the familiar pain behind his eyes and threw up an extra mental barrier using his anger as a source of strength. It had not occurred to him that his godfather would be attracted to his pain, but as the man materialised to one side of the study the Hecatemus realised he should not have be surprised.

"Sirius," Harry greeted shortly as the spirit formed properly.

The rest of the room were all looking at him, especially the ones who did not know that he was in contact with his dead godfather.

"Where's Draco?" Sirius asked assessing the room in a single glance.

"Lucius took him," Harry replied evenly, much to the growing anxiety of those who had no idea what was going on.

He really did not feel like explaining himself to the majority of the room, but he knew he would have to. Speaking to thin air was not considered the done thing and with the pressure he was under Harry had no doubt that several people would believe he had lost his mind.

"Harry, is your godfather here?" Dumbledore asked reasonably, much to the surprise of the members of the Order and the teachers in the room, only Ron and Hermione did not appear startled.

Harry nodded and tried to fight off the wave of weakness Sirius' presence caused in his system: with his bond to Draco under such pressure it was very difficult to be in the same room as his godfather. The look in the dead man's eyes was almost as angry as Harry felt and he needed the support. The Hecatemus knew his knees would give out if he let them, but he held himself upright with force of will.

"How can Sirius be here?" Remus asked, seemingly shocked and anxious about the news.

"It would appear that the peculiarities of his death have given Sirius the ability to return from beyond the veil," Dumbledore explained calmly. "Unfortunately only Harry and Draco are able to see him."

Snape snorted at the very idea.

"Are you sure the boy is not simply delusional?" the Potions master said acidly.

Harry heard himself laugh before he realised he was making the noise and the fact that it sounded vaguely hysterical even to his ears probably didn't help his case.

"Oh, that would be so much easier," he said coldly. "Why don't you lock me up in St Mungo's just to make sure?"

"There is a precedent, Severus," Dumbledore stepped in before either Snape or Harry could take the argument any further. "It has been established that Sirius is neither a ghost nor a figment of Harry's imagination."

Snape did not look convinced and Harry was in no mood to figure out why. The small logical part of his brain told him that the head of Slytherin was never rational when it came to Sirius Black, but logic was not a big part of Harry's world at that moment.

"Ghost or no ghost," the head of Slytherin said acidly, "I fail to see how Black can assist if he is dead."

It was a similar jibe to those Snape had used to ridicule Sirius when he was confined to the Order's headquarters and Harry saw his godfather react to it. The hurt in Sirius' face caused a spike of fury to explode through Harry and at that moment all he wanted to do was hurt Snape.

"Death Eater," he hissed so that it carried across the room towards the potions master.

Then Harry did something he had never done before and had no idea he could do: he concentrated on Snape, narrowed his eyes and projected a thought of Voldemort. Almost instantly Snape's hand shot to his wrist as if he was in pain. Harry felt dizzy and sick at the same time as his scar throbbed and he reached out blindly to try and steady himself. Something hit him in the back of his knees and he sat down heavily, quite surprised to find the seat that had been against the wall ready to catch him. When he looked up his godfather was staring at him intently and Harry knew who had moved the chair.

"Voldemort?" Sirius asked rapidly.

Harry shook his head, but he was in no state to explain as well as being pretty sure he didn't want to in front of the gathered crowd. Snape's face was a hard mask and he was glaring away from Harry, almost ignoring him; the Gryffindor did not know if the head of Slytherin realised what had really happened.

"The first thing we have to do is find where Lucius has taken Draco," Dumbledore continued the meeting as if it had not just been interrupted by a dead man. "We can guarantee that he will not be using the Manor, which leaves us with a myriad of possibilities."

Harry tried once again to reach Draco and felt the wall of confusion between them. The Hecatemus knew his soul mate was awake and angry, but it was almost unbearable that he could not reach him. Being without the constant companionship; held from each other by force: it was almost more than Harry could bear.

"Why don't you know where he is?" Sirius asked as Harry tried to squash the overwhelming emotions that threatened.

"A curse," he replied, ignoring the rest of the room even as they looked at him oddly, "they're trying to separate us."

Then Harry remembered: last time Sirius had visited he had gone to Draco when the soul mates were not together: a spark of hope lit in the Hecatemus' mind.

"Sirius, can you find him," he asked, trying hard not to sound too desperate; "like you did before, last time?"

His godfather looked pensive and uncertain.

"I don't know, Harry," the apparition admitted slowly, "he was not far away last time. I'm focussed on you, I don't know if I can suddenly switch."

The rest of the room were staring at Harry, he knew it without even looking, but he didn't care.

"He's part of me," he said firmly, "can you at least try?"

Sirius appeared undecided, but he nodded anyway: it was all Harry could ask for.

"Harry, what's going on?" Hermione's voice cut into the conversation and Harry all but glared at her.

"You have to focus on him," Sirius said, ignoring the input from the living members of the Order, "give me something to start with."

There was very little thought in Harry's mind as he obeyed his godfather's instruction; nothing else mattered except Draco and Harry did not care what anyone else in the room was thinking. He put every fibre of his being into focusing his mind on his soul mate: he pushed at the barrier between them, knowing it would cause him discomfort, but wanting to give Sirius all the help he could.

Harry felt rather than saw his godfather do anything since he was barely aware of his outward senses as his mind focussed inwards. The sensation of nausea increased and the wrongness of the whole situation tried very hard to make itself known: the universe did not like what was going on and it made itself very plain to Harry's peculiar senses. To back up this position, Sirius grunted as if in pain, which considering he was dead, was quite an unexpected occurrence.

Something ruffled Harry's hair and he felt the magic within him stirring: it was not the most pleasant sensation. His body and mind were reacting to what Sirius was doing and he had to fight hard to remain in control.

"Harry," someone said, but was quickly hushed.

"Sirius, find him," it was almost an order and, as if he could do nothing but obey, Harry's godfather suddenly vanished.

Rather than the feelings of wrongness decreasing, they intensified and he knew he could not keep this up for long. His focus was total, but it was accompanied by a blinding headache and an inescapable desire to curl up and die. It did not help that the confusion that was Draco echoed the pain almost as clearly as if their bond was not being disrupted.

Harry lost all track of time, only one thought repeating in his mind. "Find Draco" bounced through his brain and he used it almost like a hypnotic mantra. Nothing made it past the focus; nothing impinged on his consciousness; nothing until he heard his godfather bark his name. His vision kicked in at the urgency and hurt in Sirius' tone and Harry snapped back to the present to see the man standing a few feet in front of him his features pale and drawn. If he had not known his godfather was dead he would have sworn that he was a flesh and blood man in pain.

"Brancepeth Castle," Sirius said as their eyes met, "the Death Eaters have him at Brancepeth Castle."

Then his godfather clutched his arms about his stomach and fell to his knees, beginning to fade as he did so.

"Sirius," Harry cried, reaching out to his godfather as the man vanished from sight.

In his panic Harry over stretched himself and he felt himself toppling from the chair before he could do anything about it. All strength had left him and even the seething fury at Voldemort's lackeys could not sustain him. Someone caught him as he fell and already weakened shields almost shattered under the pressure, but Harry managed to hold it together for just a few seconds more.

"Brancepeth Castle," he said as he looked up into Remus Lupin's eyes. "Sirius says Draco's at Brancepeth Castle."

Then Harry let blackness take him.

Chapter 34 Blake House

He was moving gently to and fro and half lying and half sitting on something, or at least that's what Harry's senses informed him when the world chose to return. Surprisingly his shields were not completely down, they were in their lower than normal, sleep level, but were otherwise intact. Harry opened his eyes and found himself inside what looked like one of the carriages that always took them to school from the train. He was propped up on one of the seats with a blanket tucked round him. Moving slowly he turned his head to see Ron and Hermione sitting on the opposite seat, holding hands and looking out the windows.

"Where are we going?" he asked quietly, trying to gather his wits.

"Harry," Hermione said instantly, "you're awake."

The young man mumbled a reply and tried to sit up a little further, but gave up when the blankets required far too much effort to move.

"Just lay still," Hermione said sternly, "you're exhausted and we're almost there."

"Where?" Harry repeated his question.

"Blake house," his friend supplied evenly, "it's near Brancepeth Castle. It belongs to one of the Order; we'll be using it as a base."

Harry shifted again, attempting to find a more comfortable position.

"Any news?" he asked, trying to keep emotion as far away from his higher brain as possible.

"You've been out for a couple of hours," Ron told him with his characteristic worried frown. "It turns out Brancepeth is a suspected Death Eater outpost: the Order has been keeping an eye on it for a few months, but they hadn't had a reason to move in before; seems there is life there at the moment."

Harry let the information sink in; the whole incident with his godfather was hazy in his memory and seemed almost like a dream, but obviously it was not. The knowledge that they knew where Draco was brought him hope, but his soul refused to stop wailing its pain at the curse which was separating him from Draco.

"Anything else?" he asked slowly, focusing on the practicalities of the situation.

His two friends shared a look as they seemed to do a lot these days and he waited to find out what they had to say.

"We think you should know," Ron said evenly, "most of the Order was against you coming to Blake House. They all Apparated on ahead and we stayed to travel with you, and most of them thought you should be kept at Hogwarts, they think you're unstable."

That caused a flare of anger in Harry, but he would need that source of strength later so he tried to ignore it.

"I am unstable," he admitted: there was no point in denying it. "If they don't want me in on this, how is it I am here?"

"Ron pointed out how rational you were likely to be when you woke up if they left you behind," Hermione told him with a quick glance of admiration at her boyfriend. "I think the apocalyptic references might have been a little over the top, but otherwise he was very eloquent."

"Snape then suggested Madame Pomfrey should drug you so you didn't wake up," Ron continued the explanation.

That didn't surprise Harry in the slightest.

"Then Dumbledore stepped in," Hermione took over again, "and pointed out that if anyone tried to prevent you from doing whatever you needed to do to restore your bond with Draco they would end up in Azkaban. That ended all discussions."

Just for a moment Harry let himself enjoy the mental image his friends' words conjured up and a smile played at his lips, but it did not last long. His awareness slipped back to the barrier between himself and Draco like fingers picking at a scab and he realised several seconds had passed by the time the real world became dominant in his mind again.

"Is there a plan yet?" he asked as he looked up at his companions.

"We haven't heard," Ron told him openly. "I think they're still doing the recon."

That would make sense: the Order rarely rushed in to anything without a good reason. Harry was pondering possible scenarios in his head when he felt the muscles down his back twinge and complain. Or at least that's what he thought he felt until he analysed the sensation and realised the discomfort had not originated in his body.

"Harry, are you all right?" Hermione asked anxiously and he realised he must have given an indication of what he felt.

"It's Draco," the Hecatemus said as he searched his mind for answers, "I think..."

His response was cut short as a startled cry passed his lips caused by the pain that lanced through his back.

"Oh god, no," Harry whispered knowing what was coming next.

Another stab of pain came from Draco and Harry closed his eyes trying to cope with his lover's injury.

"Harry?" Hermione sounded very worried now.

"They're trying to break him," he said, looking up at his friend without trying to hide the fear in his eyes. "It's begun."

The involuntary yelp that made it past his lips as whatever they were doing to his lover came through the link again, caused a flash of deep concern on both of his friends' faces.

"Is there anything we can do?" Ron asked almost desperately and all Harry could do was bite his lip and shake his head.

The only way to end this was to find the bastards doing this and rescue Draco: it was all anyone could do. However, he also realised that he could not let Draco's

pain prevent him from being useful. He might not be able to break through the curse to his soul mate but there were other ways he could help.

"I need to concentrate," he said slowly, "I have to block out the pain. I'm sorry, I can't talk anymore."

His companions nodded at him, expressions of worry mixed with sympathy on their faces. Harry knew what it was like to feel helpless, but he had no time to dwell on what his friends were feeling now. Turning his awareness inward once more he began to separate his physical reactions from those of his lover. Pain came and went, sometimes the same, sometimes different and painstakingly Harry constructed walls in his own mind behind which he could place the hurt.

It would not go away; the only method of stopping that would be to break the bond completely, but as he concentrated he boxed the pain out of his forethoughts. It was hard, one of the most difficult things Harry could ever remember because he wanted to share the pain; it was the most real thing he had felt from Draco since the curse had been placed on him. Part of his soul revelled in the contact and he wanted to be close to his lover in any way possible, but the rest of him won out.

Harry could not do it coldly and logically so he found the anger again and he used it. He let the fury in his soul strengthen him and build the steel cage in his mind. By the time he felt the jolt of the coach landing, Harry was consumed by his rage and he shied away when Hermione reached to help him off his seat.

"Don't," he said shortly and unwrapped himself from the blanket, all sign of weakness gone.

There was no room in this for failure; no room for frailty; and Harry would not let his body betray him anymore than he would let his mind. He followed the others out of the carriage into the courtyard of a large Victorian mansion with his head held high and his eyes shining with wrath.

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The dining room held a long table with at least twelve chairs and a few of them were occupied, while other members of the Order stood around or hurried in and out. Several people tried to talk to Harry as he walked across to where Dumbledore was seated, but he answered only with glares and monosyllables. He looked straight into the headmaster's eyes without trying to hide any of the fury he was feeling and Dumbledore gazed back at him calmly. Eventually the headmaster indicated a place just behind him where there was a mantle piece and Harry took up position without comment. He did not even bother to try and guess how Dumbledore knew he did not want to sit down.

The room was divided into groups and there was a general chatter in the air, which Harry allowed to wash over him in an incomprehensible haze. The sharp reoccurring pains from Draco had stopped and were now an ache that permeated across their link. The actual torture had stopped, but Harry knew it was far from over and he had steeled himself for whatever was coming next.

Letting his eyes flick around the room he was aware of gazes lingering on him: some like Hermione's, Ron's and Lupin's appeared openly anxious, other's like Snape's and Moody's appeared worried, but in a much less personal manner. By surveying the room Harry could tell exactly who did not want him to be there.

When his torturers started on Draco again no matter what his promises to himself Harry heard himself gasp and he grabbed at the mantle piece to stop from falling.

"Albus, enough is enough," Moody spoke firmly and as if he knew exactly what he was talking about, "the boy should be somewhere safe: losing both of them will not help us at all."

Harry dragged himself back up to his full height and threw every ounce of control he had into forcing his lover's agony into the back of his mind.

"There is no separation," he threw the words at the Auror with all the venom he possessed, "you lose one you lose both."

"All the more reason to keep you where we know you aren't a danger or a liability to the mission," Moody was nothing if not plain spoken.

"Well excuse me for not being ready for Cruciatus," Harry spat his response viciously, "it took me by surprise: it won't happen again."

All talking in the room had ceased and all eyes were on the Hecatemus and the Auror: Moody did not seem to know how to reply.

"Harry, Lucius has placed Draco under the Cruciatus curse?" Dumbledore broke the silence.

Harry's eyes flicked to the headmaster and he answered with a short nod. The pain running through his mind was almost numbing and only a diamond edged will to survive and every technique Hilde had ever taught him stopped him succumbing to it. For once he was grateful for the curse keeping him from complete rapport with Draco or he would have been a screaming heap on the floor.

"We must bring forward the schedule," the headmaster decided the moment he had the affirmative; "we cannot afford to wait. I suggest we move at dawn."

"Our reconnaissance isn't done," Tonks pointed out in a reasonable tone, "we have no idea of the layout once we're inside."

"That is as maybe," Dumbledore replied evenly, "but we have no choice; Draco may not survive longer."

Harry heard the unspoken 'and if he does he may not be sane' at the end of the headmaster's statement, but he did not choose to consider that.

"Is the castle a magical building?" he asked pointedly as the assault from Draco's mind stopped for a few moments.

"What has that got to do..." Moody's tone was dismissive.

"Just answer the bloody question," Harry shouted at him not knowing how long he had before the next onslaught began.

"Yes," the Auror looked taken aback, but he did answer.

"Then get me in and I'll tell you where they all are and what the layout is," the Hecatemus said shortly.

Many faces in the room looked sceptical.

"How?" Moody asked suspiciously.

Harry was not in the mood to explain and he didn't think it would work anyway so he took the direct route of a practical demonstration. Closing his eye he lowered his barriers and launched his senses into a sweep of Blake House. He had been practicing for a long time to perfect the technique and he didn't quite have it down completely yet, but necessity was a great teacher.

"This house had four floors, including an attic, and two cellars, one of which is magically hidden," he said rapidly trying to assimilate the information as fast as possible. "There are twenty four rooms in the main house, six of which are accessible only via magical doors. There are thirty portraits of deceased family members, all animate, and I won't bother telling you where. Five house elves run the home; three males and two females: three are in the cellar, one is in the master bedroom and one is up the chimney behind this fireplace. There are seventeen people in this house, twelve in this room, three in the attic and two in the drawing room. Fifteen are wizards, one is a Muggle and one is a squib. Do you need any more information?"

As if to underline his point, a head with very large eyes appeared in the fireplace and blinked at the assembled company.

"Will Sir, be requiring Blakey's services?" the elf asked earnestly.

For a moment the creature blinked at Harry questioningly and then the young man realised it was talking to him.

"No," he said shortly.

The elf shrugged and moved back up the chimney to whatever it had been doing. When the Gryffindor looked back at Moody the man was actually looking impressed.

"Interesting talent," the Auror commented without the least sign of remorse for his previous statements. "How far can it reach?"

"How ever large the building is," Harry told him while trying to hold on to his temper. "The larger the building the longer it takes, but I've done it with Hogwarts."

"The whole place?" even Hermione sounded incredulous at that.

"Yes," the young man snapped and then he didn't care anymore because Draco's tormentors started again.

Harry shuddered, but he was better prepared this time and he bit back his reaction firmly. He borrowed some of Draco's father's teachings: weakness in the sight of others was the enemy.

"You could still be more trouble than help," Moody pointed out. "If you collapse in there that takes at least two of our people out to look after you."

"I have to be as close as possible," the Gryffindor managed to keep his voice steady, "I can keep him sane, you can't."

"Harry has proven he can be useful on the mission," Dumbledore's voice was calm and collected; "he will be going. The requirements for this rescue are specific we need to discus the details."

Which is what they did for the next half an hour. Every facet of the upcoming mission was taken apart and dissected and Harry tried to follow it, but he knew he missed bits. When the meeting finally broke up there were three hours before they planned to move and as soon as people disappeared Dumbledore turned to Harry where he was still standing next to the fireplace.

"It would be a good idea to rest, Harry," the headmaster said seriously, "they will not leave without you."

"Can't," the young man said tersely.

"There are potions that will allow you to get some sleep," Remus offered as he walked over while other filed out.

"No," was all Harry said and pushed himself away from the wall.

The werewolf looked at him and Harry could see the worry in his friend's eyes.

"There's no point in killing yourself, Harry," the ex-Professor said quietly.

"Don't push me, Remus," Harry said equally as quietly, "I'm likely to snap and that won't be pretty. Leave me alone."

Lupin almost shied away at the calculated words.

"Harry," Dumbledore said as he walked towards the door, "there will be another meeting in one hour: you may wish to be there."

He nodded at his headmaster and then continued to the door. It took another thirty five minutes for the rest of those in the house to figure out that 'leave me alone' meant exactly that. Harry lost count of how many people he snarled at or verbally dissected before he found a quiet corner where no one would bother him.

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Cornelius Fudge barged into the room before anyone could do anything about it: he looked harassed and annoyed.

"What is this?" he demanded loudly. "What business do you have dragging me halfway across the country without explanation?"

Harry glowered at the man with distaste: he and the Minister were far from friends and he was in no mood to put up with the odious little man.

"Ah, Cornelius," Dumbledore greeted cordially, "thank you for joining us. I would like you to meet several key members of the Order of the Phoenix. We are here on a rescue mission."

The open way with which the headmaster spoke appeared to leave Fudge at a loss and it surprised several people in the room as well, although not all. Harry was one of the startled ones.

"Order of the Phoenix?" the Minister of Magic asked looking at the assembled group.

"An organisation which fought Voldemort in the first war," Dumbledore explained calmly, "and who have been opposing him again for the last three years."

"Unlike the Ministry we can guarantee every member is not a Death Eater," Harry almost growled at the man who over the years had caused him a great deal of problems.

The fury inside the young man seemed to have a will of its own and he could not suppress it. Fudge glared at him and Harry glared right on back, regardless of how it would help or hinder the situation.

"This is preposterous," the Minister, said firmly, "we have no need of secret organisations."

"I beg to differ, Cornelius," Dumbledore said seriously, "the Order was the only thing that prevented Voldemort from retrieving the full prophecy from the Department of Mysteries and has been instrumental in blocking several plots since. It is time to put aside our differences and to work together: we can be useful to you and you can be useful to us. I asked you here today because this mission is pivotal in our efforts and there are Aurors I want from you to make sure it is a success."

Harry watched as Fudge considered the headmaster's words, but he did not think the Minister would say yes.

"What is the mission?" Harry was surprised when the man asked a sensible question.

"Earlier today Lucius Malfoy kidnapped his son," Dumbledore said and Fudge's eyes immediately snapped to Harry. "He is being held in Brancepeth castle and we intend to retrieve him at dawn."

The Minster frowned at that.

"I'll need more time," he said pointedly, "I cannot make this decision alone."

That was all it took to eradicate any patience Harry had left and he all but snarled at the pompous little man.

"Grow a backbone," he hissed viciously, "there is no time. This is war you pathetic little man: they're Death Eaters in that castle not Muggle Studies teachers. Do you think they're playing house? Have you any idea what they're doing to Draco? Voldemort wants me dead or better yet a vegetable. Can you imagine the publicity: The Boy Who Lived a gibbering wreck in St Mungos? Great for the war effort wouldn't you say?"

All through his speech he moved closer to the Minister and by the time he had finished Harry was nose to nose with Fudge. The man actually looked a little afraid.

"Is this true?" Fudge looked to Dumbledore as he asked and Harry had about had enough.

It was a bad idea to push someone who was on the edge and the Hecatemus was definitely skirting a fine line.

"Of course it's true, you idiot," Harry almost screamed at the man, "I don't make these things up just for the hell of it. Oh sorry you're of the Rita Skeeter, Umbridge school of intelligence aren't you. Want to see the scar I have thanks to your agent's petty games?"

A wave of icy cold hit the raging youth as a hand connected with his shoulder. It was such a shock that it took Harry's temper off the boil and he turned to see Snape standing beside him completely devoid of expression. The Potions master did not speak he just shook his head slightly and put a little pressure on the Gryffindor's shoulder; surprising himself, Harry moved away.

"Cornelius," Dumbledore took up the cause once again, "we move at dawn. We would like this to be a joint effort between the Ministry and the Order, but we will do this alone if necessary."

Fudge did not look completely convinced and Harry felt his anger rising again. What stopped him from acting was Draco. Pain surged through their bond again and Harry felt his knees give way and a cry pass his lips. Thanks to Fudge he had lost his concentration and he was not prepared for the onslaught: he could no more block it than he could block pain from his own body. He curled in on himself desperately trying to drive the pain away into the back corner of his mind. This was not his pain and his body knew it if only he could separate it out in his mind. It might have been confused across the partially blocked link, but it was still agony and it took Harry a long time to push it into the small mental box he had constructed in his head for just that purpose.

"Harry, can you hear me," were the first words that filtered into his brain and he recognised Remus' voice.

"Yes," he said quietly through clenched teeth.

The werewolf may not have been the world's number one expert on Hecatemae, but he had obviously done his homework and learned from his time with Harry. Lupin was neither leaning too close to, nor touching the Gryffindor in case his presence interrupted Harry's concentration.

"Can you help me up, please," Harry asked as weariness flooded his body.

It was all the permission Remus needed and strong hands pulled Harry to his feet. He was still angry, but he had no strength to fuel his fury and even as Remus left him standing Harry felt his legs going again. The will it took to keep Draco's pain away from the front of his mind was huge and he didn't have anything left for anything else. He was very grateful when Lupin caught him in strong arms and helped him to a chair.

"Which Aurors do you want?" Fudge's voice surprised Harry and he looked past the werewolf to the Minister of Magic.

The man was ashen faced and it appeared he finally understood.

Chapter 35 Holding On

Harry sat in the chair failing to listen to the members of the Order for a good hour before he even attempted to move. He used the time to focus his mind again and every time the Death Eaters hit Draco with Cruciatus the young man let his thoughts curl around the pain, refusing to let it take over, but feeling it none the less. He knew Draco would not be able to discern what he was thinking, but he continued to send all the love and support he could. It was impossible to know if his soul mate could understand, but it was all he could do, and each time the torment ended Draco was still there.

Everyone left him alone and by the time Moody came into the room to collect him for the mission Harry was standing looking out of the window, his mask firmly in place. Dawn was almost on them and he turned to the retired Auror as soon as the man walked in.

"Well, Boy," Moody said evenly, "it's time, are you ready?"

Harry looked at the man coolly and nodded without replying, which seemed to be enough for the ex-Auror. However, as the wizard turned to leave, something in the Gryffindor snapped and Harry's anger escaped his icy control just a little.

"Do you believe he's not one of them now?" he asked acidly.

Moody paused and turned back slowly, his features calm and collected.

"Either that, or you've sold us out as well, Boy," the wizard said calmly and without bothering to find out what Harry would say to that Moody walked out of the room.

The fury inside the Hecatemus almost found a target then, but Harry knew he needed the powerful emotion, and although he burned to turn his anger on the paranoid ex-Auror he reeled it in. There would be targets for his rage on the other side and the outcome of the mission would settle Moody's problem once and for all.

Pulling himself to his full height, Harry walked out of the room and towards the group of people waiting by the front door. Some of the team he did not recognise, but those he did were Ron, Fred and George, Tonks, Remus, Moody and Dumbledore. There were another four with them and Harry assumed they were the Ministry people that the headmaster had wanted for the mission. He was not completely sure the Aurors were there because they were the only ones for the job, or if this was a cooperation exercise orchestrated by Dumbledore, but he didn't really care if it meant he could have Draco back.

Harry already knew how they were going to get in and what he was expected to do once they did, and he saw little point in wasting energy in speaking. He met the gaze of each member of the group once and then he set his eyes towards the door. The only thing that mattered to him was Draco and he was not in Blake house. He barely even blinked when Moody cast a Disillusionment charm over him and the familiar cold feeling flowed over his body. The magic in the spell made his skin tingle, but he ignored it.

"Let's go," Moody said firmly after the whole group had been camouflaged.

Brancepeth castle was a few miles down the road, but it was no distance on a broom. It was a warm night and they were flying low, but the speed put a chill

into the air, reminding Harry of the high flying he had done way back in his fifth year. It was nowhere near as bad, but the scene was so familiar, only this time he was not flying away from danger but into it. During the whole journey only once did he almost falter when Draco was again subjected to torment, but Harry held on and his rage burned that little bit brighter.

It was as they flew into the grounds that Harry felt the tingling over his body begin to fade and the whole party descended to the ground, becoming clearly visible as they did so. There were protections on the castle and its surroundings preventing concealment spells, a fact which had been ascertained on the scouting missions carried out earlier so it did not surprise anyone. Countering the alarms had been taken care of, but since the charm the group was using was only practical from a distance they had not bothered to extend its usefulness.

Two of the team: Tonks and one of the other Aurors, were sent in as the others waited and Harry heard some unsettling noises before the pair appeared again. The young man was in no doubt that a least one, if not more, human beings had just died, but he refused to think about it as the main group made their way into the target building. It was a dank, dark back door to what had to once have been the servants' part of the castle, but all Harry cared about was the fact that it let him into the structure. The moment he was inside he moved to the side wall and let his barriers drop to a very low level sending his senses out as fast as he could.

It was not like Hogwarts, it wasn't even like Blake house and the moment Harry let the place into his mind he wanted to be ill. The whole building reeked of Dark magic and evil things that assailed his mind like spiders or oozing leeches. The power here was alien to him as it twisted its surroundings rather than working in harmony to create what it wanted. Suddenly the difference between light and dark magic was so clear in Harry's mind it was painful, but he pushed through it. The energy around him might not have been what he was used to, but it could still tell him what he needed to know.

The castle was very large, but he did not need to learn everything about it and Harry let his senses skim over the whole place. The strange, abstract world Harry perceived with his magical connection formed a picture in his mind of his surroundings and the young wizard let his instincts lead him. It did not take him long to find the information he needed.

"Twenty wizards, three Muggles," Harry began to speak as soon as he assimilated the data. "Twelve wizards upstairs all together with one of the Muggles; the Muggle is almost dead, I think the Death Eaters have been playing. There are only two ways down from there to here, one at the end of this corridor, turn left, go up the stairs and they are in the large room opposite. The other is at the opposite end of the wing but it's blocked by wards."

The wizard's mind roamed on and continued to form the abstract ideas which became detailed information.

"Other eight wizards are down from here, in," Harry searched for the right word, "in the dungeon. One way down: take the first right, then left, then right again. Two wizards are at the entrance, another two about one hundred yards after the bottom of the stairs. The two Muggles are somewhere there as well but they're more difficult to pinpoint. The other four wizards are behind some very powerful wards towards the end of the tunnels. It's difficult to see past them; they are very old and strong, but one of those inside is Draco, and I think another is Lucius Malfoy."

Just as Harry withdrew his ranging senses he felt his lover subjected to Crucio yet again and his control almost gave. When the Gryffindor came back to himself he was breathing hard and Moody was eyeing him sceptically. Straightening his back Harry glared at the man directly in his magical eye and dared the ex-Auror to say anything. Now was not the time Harry would fail; not when he was so close.

"Fred, George, Austin, Grebes," Dumbledore spoke quickly and with all his calm authority. "Go upstairs and prevent those above from coming below. Do whatever is necessary. Everyone else, we are going to the dungeon."

A small part of Harry's mind informed him that this was all completely crazy, but most of him was focused on his soul mate's rescue. Without considering exactly what he was doing, he gripped his wand and followed Ron down the corridor. Harry had no doubt whatsoever that every one in the party was prepared to carry out whatever might be necessary to succeed in the mission.

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Harry felt Draco's pain well up again and he almost lost hope. Holding onto his lover's sanity through the barrier keeping them apart was like trying to hold on to a slippery fish and it was killing them both. No one could get past the dark wards protecting the dungeon where Draco was being held and even the supreme effort of the combined team seemed futile. This was not right and yet he could not reach his lover.

For the hundredth time he looked up at the web of magic that surrounded the dungeon: it pulsed with evil intent and filled his senses with a sick dark feeling. It was too complicated for him to unravel and with Draco's agony running through his mind he could not concentrate hard enough to use regular magic like the others.

Draco was slipping away from him. They could all hear the youth's screams as they echoed through the dark halls and they were becoming weaker. Harry turned and leant his head against the wall trying so hard to reach his soul mate through the spell that enshrouded him.

"No, Draco, don't give up," he whispered breathlessly as Draco's presence dimmed even more, "we're coming, stay with me."

Complete despair reached up to grab Harry as all his efforts seemed to fail. As Draco's screams died away the confused link from Harry's mind to his lover's began to fade and a wail started deep inside him. Without Draco there was only madness; without Draco life was not worth living; and Harry did not care about anything else. As his lover's life slipped away so did Harry's sanity and his defences crumbled.

Harry's mental barriers fell completely and he was assailed by emotions and raw power. Magic leapt at him from his companion's spells as they tried to cast at the dark wards blocking their way, power even leeched from the wards themselves. Not caring what it would do to him Harry welcomed the raw magic and took it all inside feeling the burning of the power in his veins. Draco was leaving him and all that he needed in the world was Draco: it was wrong.

"This is getting us nowhere," someone spoke, but Harry did not even try to figure out whom; his sole focus was Draco, "we need to find another way in."

Like a child throwing a tantrum Harry let the desperation mutate into anger and fury. With a snarl he pushed himself away from the wall and moved past his regrouping companions walking swiftly to the magical barrier that was blocking the corridor. Beyond caring what the consequences might be, Harry reached out and took hold of the tangled web of magic that made up the wards. Instantly the sick, evil feeling of the dark power flooded him: these wards had been made in pain and suffering with old blood magic and Harry could almost feel the deaths of those sacrificed to create them. He heard a groan escape his lips and someone called to him, but he ignored both.

Balling up all the emotion and the magic inside him he screamed his fury to the world and using every ounce of Quidditch trained muscle he possessed he pulled. There was no way he could unravel the dark wards, they were far too complicated for anything but long term dismantling, so instead he went for brute force. Desperation and partial insanity were not a good combination for most circumstances, but right about then Harry found them very useful. It never occurred to him that what he was doing should have been impossible, or that he might just as easily tear himself apart as the wards and he ripped at the fabric of the magic recklessly.

The effects were quite startling: after only a few moments the shimmering barrier gained an ugly green crack where his finger's held it. The crack became wider as he pulled with every fibre of his being and then things escalated. From a green line about two feet in length the barrier shattered almost like a windscreen of a car, covering its whole surface in small glowing cracks. Then it exploded outwards and Harry felt himself flying through the air. He collided with someone and then they both hit the sidewall where the corridor bent to the left. It was a stunning experience and Harry lost his hold on the real world.

When sensation returned the first thing Harry did was reach for Draco and he found the confused, faint echo of the man he loved: at least the other wizard was still alive and for the moment he was not in pain. It was an instinctive act and only after he was sure his soul mate was still alive did anything else make it into his mind. Harry felt excitement, fear and pain and realised that not all of the feelings running through him were not his own. He opened his eyes to find himself gazing up at a worried looking Ron. It took Harry a few seconds, but he realised he was lying with his head in his friend's lap on the dungeon floor. Ron's red hair clashed with the colours of strong emotion coming off him.

"Harry?" hid best friend asked hesitantly as Harry blinked up at him.

"Um," was about all the reply he could manage.

"I thought I'd lost you for a moment there," Ron said quietly, "you stopped breathing on me, had to hit you with Ennervate twice."

That explained the tingling in his limbs and Harry had the distinct impression that moving would be a very bad idea.

"What happened?" Harry managed to force one question between his lips.

"You brought the wards down," Ron explained quickly, "but it caused a backlash. You and me hit the wall hard, you went out and I broke my leg: the same one I broke in the third year, different place though. The others went in about five minutes ago and I heard lots of shouting, but it went quiet a few seconds ago."

At the news Harry really wanted to find out what was happening, but when he tried to sit up pain flashed through his body. He was not sure, but it definitely felt as if there was more than one broken bone and his muscles had been put through the ringer.

"Don't try and move," Ron said urgently at Harry's efforts, "the others can handle whatever's going on. You're hurt and killing yourself is not going to help anyone."

Harry wanted to protest, but he had no energy left to even form the words. All he could do was lie across Ron's legs and wait.

"Don't worry, Harry," his friend said with a certainty that was actually mirrored in his feelings, "we'll have you and Draco back together before you know it. That stuck up Malfoy will be a thorn in my side again, like this never happened."

Ron's firm belief that everything would be all right was a comfort in the hell the universe had morphed into, but Harry could not relax until his friend's predictions came true. His body wanted him to fall into darkness and let the pain go away, but he had to hold firmly onto Draco. He focussed solely on keeping his soul mate with him through the spell that held them apart. It was an entirely different agony than the physical pain to be blocked from Draco and it cut into his soul, but it helped him to hold on.

When it suddenly vanished, it was such an incredible feeling that Harry's body responded without his volition: he gasped loudly and his back arched off the floor as if he'd been electrocuted. The fact that he could now feel with complete clarity the torture of Draco's as well as his own broken body did not matter. He was barely aware of the sob of pain that came out of his mouth as he fell back onto the cold floor; all Harry knew was that his soul mate was back in his mind. Draco's thoughts were incoherent and he was not really aware, but at an instinctive level Harry could feel his lover reaching for him. For what felt like forever Harry let the relief flood through him, but he was brought back to the world by an urgent voice.

"Harry, what's the matter?" Ron sounded frantic. "You better not be dying on me, Potter."

Out of self-preservation more than anything else Harry managed to bring up his hand and enclose his fingers around Ron's wand hand before his friend could hit him with another Ennervate charm. He could not speak and he knew he would succumb to his injuries soon, but he tried to convey what he was feeling to Ron with his eyes.

"They did it?" Ron's words were half statement, half question and Harry let his arm fall back to the floor. "See, told you."

Harry would have laughed at the smug tone if he hadn't been in quite so much pain. He barely had the ability to smile.

"Now isn't this a picture," alarm shot through Harry as he heard those words: the voice would haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life.

Knowing who he would see Harry moved his head to the side and looked at Lucius Malfoy standing beside the open entrance to a hidden passage. Draco's father was sporting a cut above one eyebrow and his left arm hung uselessly at his side, but he still had a wand in his other hand.

"Don't think it, Boy," the Death Eater said coldly as Harry felt Ron shift. "Raise that wand and you die instantly, the only one I want is the great Harry Potter. Sit still and you'll live a while longer."

The desire to laugh at the irony of the situation bubbled up in Harry, but his muscles would not obey him to let it out. Lucius' words were not the thing to say to a Gryffindor and Harry felt his friend move anyway; if Ron was going down he was going down fighting. It all seemed faintly absurd and Harry was pretty sure he was losing his grasp on reality. Lucius was of course faster than Ron and Harry was not the least bit surprised as he heard the words of the Killing Curse roll off the Death Eater's tongue. At the same moment a green flash emerged from the end of the elder Malfoy's wand Harry held up his hand.

A green, amorphous ball of seething magic halted just short of Harry's fingers. He held it there for a second watching the curse writhe against his control. In his altered state of mind Harry decided it looked rather pretty, but it felt nasty and it did not like him holding it. It was almost like hanging on to a living thing and he knew without a doubt that the magic wanted to kill him. Not pleased with this, he glared at it, told it in some abstract way that killing was not going to happen and then flicked it back the way it had come. The last thing Harry saw was Lucius Malfoy sailing through the air with a very surprised look on his face.

Chapter 36 Waking and Sleeping

Harry had become very familiar with the interesting spiral patterns of the wards on the ceiling of the isolation room in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. When he opened his eyes they were the first thing he saw, giving him a sense of safety which settled over him like a warm blanket. For a few moments he lay perfectly still, drinking in the calm and quiet, letting his fuzzy thoughts try to form some sort of order, but it could not last. Harry's mind was not quiet and the serenity which surrounded him did not sit well with him. Almost before he knew what was bothering him he turned on his side and his gaze roamed over the sleeping form of his lover.

Such relief ran through him that Harry could barely breathe. The fact that Draco was lying peacefully beside him caused his whole chest to tighten and his breath to come in short gasps. He did not know if he wanted to laugh or cry as emotions too mixed together to analyse swamped him, and yet he did not fully comprehend why. Searching his muddled mind, Harry could partially recall his soul mate's kidnapping, and he remembered the feeling of utter loss when he had woken, separated from Draco by dark magic, but everything else was dim and confused.

Vague memories of pain and anger filled him when he tried to look deeper. Faces of people floated behind his mind's eye: Sirius, Moody, Dumbledore, Fudge, Lucius Malfoy; but none were clear and Harry could not recall what these people had been doing. It was all so confusing and his mind shied away from trying to sort through the information. All that mattered was that he could see Draco; his soul mate was whole and sleeping peacefully, the currents of his mind flowing gently as they normally did. It was such a wonderful feeling that the memories of fury and agony could not diminish it.

So captivated by the pale blond profile was he that only slowly did Harry become aware of the pale line running the length of Draco's face, over the Slytherin's forehead, past his eye and down the pale cheek to the jaw line. Reaching out slowly he ran one finger lightly over the mark, tracing its length with quiet deliberation. Harry had seen traces of wounds before; he had had several himself and the magically healed injury would fade in time, but that there remained any mark after a healer of Madame Pomfrey's calibre had treated the wound indicated just how deep the cut had been. It made the muddled recollections in his mind seem suddenly real and for a while Harry could not bring himself to move.

The anger he remembered began to burn again as the truth that Draco's father had tried to destroy his son and separate them settled in his thoughts. What Lucius had done was horrific and Harry felt the fury at the man's actions trying to take over his mind. The pale reflections of the truth his confused mind could provide made him so angry that he feared what the whole memory would do to him. Harry wanted to strike out and hurt anyone who had touched his soul mate.

As these ideas twisted round his thoughts, he never took his eyes off Draco and under his gaze the calm, pale features slowly began to move. At first there was only a small twitch, but over the space of a few moments a frown began to mar the Slytherin's perfect face. A quiet moan escaped Draco's throat and Harry moved forward in a bid to comfort his soul mate, but the sound increased. It was like a bucket of ice water thrown over him as he realised with a start that he was the cause of his lover's distress; his anger was disturbing Draco's sleep and that was unacceptable.

The fury dissolved in concern as Draco moved slightly in reaction to the emotions running through Harry. He closed his eyes, pushing the feeling far away and

calming his thoughts with a will made of iron. Draco relaxed back onto the bed almost immediately and Harry reached out to his soul mate and rested his hand on the blond head. Stroking gently he made his own body relax as well and Harry just lay there, refusing to think of anything except his soul mate. He let his love for Draco drown out everything else and allowed his mind to fade out any other thoughts. He did not move for many minutes.

Eventually, unable to untangle the confusion in his head and unable to go back to sleep, he decided to opt for the physical world. Harry sat up slowly. His body felt as if it had been through the wringer, but it was nothing he hadn't experience before. Careful not to wake Draco and keeping his thoughts well away from anything distressing, he calmly began to build his mental barriers. The world was very pretty and fascinating when he used his enhanced senses, but it was wearing and often difficult to interpret, so he chose bringing everything back down to normal as his first task.

Once he had done this he slipped his legs off the bed, pushed them into the slippers that were helpfully waiting and moved as fast as possible to the bathroom. It was here he almost lost it again as he moved to close the door and found himself quite incapable of doing so. As he pushed the oak towards its resting point, the wood obscured his view of Draco and Harry felt the irrational desire to panic. Only when he pulled the door open again did the feeling fade and he leant on the frame, breathing hard, calming himself down again. It was a purely instinctive reaction, but he couldn't stop it and eventually Harry went about his business with the door open so he could see Draco every time he glanced over.

Once he had taken care of his physical needs, he padded over to the speaking wall. Touching the activation stone, Harry waited calmly for an answer. The first thing to come up was a recorded message in hazy blue.

{Please do not dismantle the door charm, Mr Potter,} the writing even had Madame Pomfrey's disapproving tone; {it is there for your own safety and took several hours to replace. I took the opportunity to have a second key added to the spell and it is in the box by the door.}

"Thank you," Harry said evenly and the words appeared under the message; Madame Pomfrey would receive his reply next time she looked at the wall. "Is anyone there?"

He waited a few seconds and wondered what time it was and if anyone would be around to talk to him. For a while nothing happened and then gold lettering appeared indicating that there was someone sending him a message live.

{Harry? It's Tonks.}

That was a surprise to start with; the fact that the Auror had not gone back to her job immediately was a shock. The Order did not usually stay around long after a mission was complete and his lack of memory threatened to bother Harry again, but he squashed the feeling.

"Yes, it's me," he spoke quietly to the wall, "I just woke up. How long have we been in here this time?"

{Two days,} the reply came back, {how are you feeling?}

Harry thought about it for a while.

"Sore," he said eventually, "and confused. I can't remember much, especially after we left Hogwarts. Is everyone okay?"

There was a pause and Harry could imagine his friend's face as she tried to decide on the correct response.

{Yes, everyone is fine. It's probably for the best you don't remember,} Tonks' words filtered onto the wall, {that was when they started to torture that blond bombshell of yours.}

"Oh, thanks," he replied, refusing to dwell on the subject, "I think I'm glad then. It'll probably come back to me when I least need it, but you can't have everything."

{When did you become so cynical?} popped on to the wall with some jumbled letters that suggested his friend had laughed.

"My soul mate is Draco Malfoy," Harry replied with a smile, "I'm bound to pick up some bad habits."

There was another jumble of letters that suggested more laughter.

{Okay, I'll give you that,} Tonks' reply wrote itself on the wall. {How is Draco?}

"Sleeping," Harry returned and glanced fondly at his lover in the bed. "I'd rather no one came in for now if that's okay. I have my barriers back up, but I'm feeling a little delicate and I don't want to wake Draco. He'll go all protective on me and forget that he's the one who needs to heal if I put any strain on this weird brain of mine."

{You're as bad as each other,} the Auror told him. {I'll let Madame Pomfrey know. She'll want to come in when he wakes up though; he took quite a beating and you were pretty damaged yourself.}

"I know," he replied calmly, although the thought made his chest feel kind of tight, "I'll send a message the moment he opens his eyes."

He was going to go on but a yawn got in the way and put some gibberish on the wall: he was surprised to find that, even after such a short time awake, sleep was looking interesting again.

{Was that a yawn?} Tonks' question popped up with a very motherly tone.

"Yeah," Harry admitted, "I think I might go back to bed. This being upright idea seems to be more difficult than I thought."

{Sleep well, Harry,} Tonks replied quickly.

"Thanks," the young man replied, "oh, but you will tell me how come you're still here later, won't you?"

{Of course,} the wall wrote up almost instantly, {and everything else that's been going on. Now go back to bed.}

"Yes, Mum," Harry said with a smile that almost chased away the anxiety he was so studiously ignoring and reached for the control stone, "talk to you later."

He turned back to the bed and looked at it thoughtfully. Draco appeared peaceful where he was lying, but the faint evidence of bruises and cuts were stark reminders on his pale skin and would not fade for some time. Although Harry could not remember exactly what had happened, his muddled memory informed him that it was bad, very bad, and he felt suddenly very grateful to be alive. The space next to Draco that he had vacated only a few minutes previously called to him in his need to be as close to his lover as possible and he answered it. As quickly as he could manage he headed back to bed. What Draco has been put through and hence what Harry had shared were not ideas he wished to deal with at the moment. He was here, Draco was here and that was all that mattered.

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It was a feeling of great distress that brought Harry back to wakefulness the second time. His eyes flashed open the moment he first felt it and he reached for Draco instinctively. His soul mate was still asleep, but Draco's whole body was tense when Harry touched him. Draco was locked in a nightmare and Harry did the only thing he knew how to do: he opened his mind and walked into the dream with his lover.

The landscape of Draco's nightmare was dark and cold and it smelt damp, and it brought back a dim memory of the dungeon from which they had rescued him days before. It did not have the form of a real place, but it conveyed the same oppressive atmosphere and Harry heard Draco scream. Finding his lover in the dreamscape was his only concern and Harry ran, ignoring the things that leered out at him from the dark. This was not his dream, these were not his fears and he brushed them aside as if they did not exist.

The darkness was all encompassing and more than once Harry ran into a dead end, but his lover's cries of anguish drew him on. Touching minds when one was dreaming was not like the joining of conscious minds and Harry had to find the aware core of Draco's thoughts before he could do anything.

At last he ran into a chamber bathed in a menacing green light and he found his soul mate. Draco was kneeing on the floor halfway across the room: his body pressed up against a shimmering barrier thumping it with his fists. Beyond the barrier was a hazy figure and it took Harry a moment to realise that it was a dream version of himself.

"Harry!" Draco screamed, throwing himself against the barrier.

His own heart breaking at the sight, Harry did not hesitate. He ran the last few feet and sank to his knees beside Draco who didn't even seem to see him. When Harry wound his arms round his lover pulling himself close to the blond youth's body it was almost as if he wasn't there: Draco was still focussed on the indistinct image through the barrier. It would not be easy to break into the dream, but Harry knew he had to try.

"I'm here," he whispered gently in Draco's ear, "that's not me."

His voice appeared to have some effect as his soul mate stopped striking his fists against the barrier, but he was still staring fixedly at the dream copy of Harry.

"We're safe," he continued talking, "we're together again."

"They tried to take you away from me," Draco spoke softly with a small sob, still staring through the shimmering curtain.

His lover did not seem to know Harry was there: it was almost as if he was talking to himself.

"Nothing can ever do that," Harry told him quietly, "nothing will ever divide us."

"I couldn't stop them," Draco said, tears streaming down his face. "The curse, I couldn't fight it."

Draco finally sagged away from the barrier against Harry and he gladly held on to him.

"But you did, Love," he said lovingly, "you held on, I could still feel you. I could find you."

Draco had been supporting him all year, but the sudden reversal in roles did not scare Harry at all. It was his turn to be the protector now and Harry fell into the role easily.

"I love you, Draco," he said firmly, "and you're safe. It's time to wake up now."

His soul mate finally turned to face him then and he seemed to see him for the first time. Draco reached for him desperately and clung to Harry where he was lying in his arms; the dreamscape dissolved.

Harry came back to himself and he was half sitting in the bed with Draco pulled onto his chest. Draco had his head buried in his lover's shoulder and he was crying with heart wrenching sobs.

"It's okay, Draco," Harry whispered gently, holding his soul mate close, "everything is going to be fine."

Draco didn't stop crying for a long time.

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The tears had taken what strength Draco had woken up with and he had fallen into a light doze in Harry's arms, but it was not a deep sleep and he did not remain that way for long. Harry knew the moment his soul mate opened his eyes again; he had felt Draco's slow rise back to consciousness, but neither chose to speak and he held his lover tenderly, offering the simple comfort of being together. Lucius Malfoy and the other Death Eaters had seen fit to try and rip them apart and now they lay together, reaffirming that the dark had not succeeded.

"He should have just killed me," Draco said eventually in an analytical tone which belied the tremor that ran through his body, "it would have been the sensible thing to do. The shock would probably have killed you outright as well."

The topic of conversation was not as surprising to Harry as it may have seemed to anyone listening. Draco's mind was Slytherin trained and Harry had expected the rationalisation of what had happened as surely as he knew in his heart he would never let anyone take his lover away again.

"That was the point," Harry replied quietly. "Voldemort has never just wanted to kill me; he wants revenge. You were his revenge; your father was his instrument."

"I have no father," Draco replied, his voice cold and steady.

They fell into silence again, Harry rubbing one hand along his lover's back until the Slytherin eventually relaxed against him. The emotions coming from Draco were confused; somewhere between angry and afraid. This had been Lucius' final betrayal, the one from which there was no return.

"Killing me would have ended it," Draco insisted, seemingly unable to see past the logic to the truth.

It was almost as if Draco could not believe that Voldemort's insanity was so complete that the Dark Lord had lost his ability to reason like the Slytherin he was. Revenge was something Draco could understand, but blind action was not.

"When he first realised I was still an opponent," Harry began speaking slowly, "back in my first year, he asked me to join him. Then that would have been his revenge, against Dumbledore and the world of the Light; taking their hero and making him one of his own. Then his sixteen year old self made it personal and killing me would have been his revenge. After that it became more complicated, me dying wouldn't have been enough anymore, I had defeated him twice and for that I had to suffer. That was the only reason he killed Cedric I think, because he knew what it would do to me. His perfect revenge was using me to bring himself back, only then he decided to kill me himself and I stopped him again. I think that was the first time he realised I was a real threat and not just a lucky child."

For a moment his voice failed, but he closed his eyes and swallowed hard, bringing his feelings back under control. This needed to be said, he had to confirm what Draco already knew, but could not bring himself to face.

"He wants to reduce me to nothing, like he was," Harry spoke again after a few long seconds of silence. "To do that he wanted to take you away from me but leave me just enough of you to keep me alive. Death is far too good for me now and you were to be the method of my insanity."

Draco fingers were almost painful where they gripped Harry's arm and he did not speak for a long while.

"They waited for me to wake up," Draco said eventually, his voice little more than a whisper now, "before they cast the curse. They had me chained to the wall and Lucius actually asked me to return to his side. He almost sounded rational, the logical, scheming man I always thought he was, but there was something in his eyes. I laughed at him. It was so absurd I just laughed."

Draco's voice was tight and Harry moved to stroking his soul mate's hair as the Slytherin tried to explain.

[That was when they tried to separate us,] Draco continued silently, unable to make his vocal chords work. [Three of them stood around me with Lucius directly in front and they cast it at the same time. It was,] Draco had begun to tremble,[it was like they were trying to break my soul in two. I have never ... Harry, I ... they...]

[Show me,] Harry said firmly as words completely failed his shaking soul mate.

Draco shook his head, burying his face in Harry's chest.

[Draco,] Harry said again, completely sure of his need to know exactly what his lover had been through, [Beloved, show me.]

With a sob the wall Draco was trying to hold between his memory and his soul mate came crumbling down and Harry found his mind assaulted by the most terrible feeling he had ever experienced. It was worse than the separation to which he had woken after Draco's kidnapping, because he could feel the break happening and it was worse than any physical pain could ever have been. It was all Harry could do not to scream as he felt it all and heard his soul mate's remembered cry of agony. This was wrong, it was so wrong, and as his mind reeled Harry knew one thing; if it took him the rest of his life he would find a way to make sure this could never, ever happen again.

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Many of the events after the curse had been cast on Draco were hazy and confused for both of them. They had talked for a while, which had occasionally jogged their memories, but nothing particularly detailed. Then Harry had fulfilled his promise to alert Madame Pomfrey that they were both awake. The school healer had given them both a thorough once over and instructed them to get as much rest as they could before leaving them alone once more.

Neither of them were recovered from the injuries they had received even though they couldn't exactly remember what they were, so they spent much of the remainder of the first day following Madame Pomfrey's orders. A bath was about as strenuous as they managed and, since it had been the middle of the afternoon when the healer had entered the room in the first place, the woman would not allow any visitors until the next day. With little energy the couple chose to retire early and the pair fell asleep before the rest of the school would even have finished dinner.

Harry had no idea how long he had been asleep when he was thrown to wakefulness by a dream. The images in his mind's eye did not fade and although they were distorted and confused, Harry knew without a doubt that they were bits of memory. He sat up in bed, breathing hard, trying to bring his racing heart under control. He did not want to believe that what he was remembering was true, but the recollections were too exact to be anything but memories.

Beside him Draco stirred, sitting up slowly and resting one hand on Harry's shoulder.

"What is it, Love?" his soul mate asked in a sleepy, but never the less, concerned voice. "Nightmare?"

Harry looked at Draco in slowly dawning horror as the images in his mind became clearer. This was all they needed and yet he feared it was true.

"I think," Harry said tentatively, "I think I killed Lucius."

His mind's eye was full off the writhing, evil curse, held in check by his innate power and then its path as it flew back at its originator. In the low night light level Draco's features glowed eerily and even if Harry had not been able to feel the shock his statement caused flowing through his lover, he could see it in Draco's features.

"He used the Killing curse," Harry said in a rush, needing to explain, somehow to excuse his actions, "I caught it. I didn't really know what I was doing and I sent it back."

It was one thing to disown a father, it was another to find out your lover had killed him, and Harry could not look Draco in the eye. He vaguely remembered communing with the curse before sending it back at Lucius, it was possible he had changed it, but he didn't know and he panicked. Harry had to find out, he had to be sure if he was a murderer and he scrambled out of bed like a man possessed.

"Harry," Draco's voice followed him, but Harry was too wrapped up in his own need to pay too much attention, "wait."

He ripped the key from its place beside the door and forced it into the lock, tearing the door open as if his life depended on it. He tore into the next room and ran straight into another person, at which point his legs, which were burning with the sudden exercise, decide to give out.

"Harry?" Remus' worried tones broke into the young man's frantic thoughts.

He gripped the werewolf's arms as the man sank with him to the floor, looking into his friend's worried eyes.

"Is he dead?" Harry asked desperately and caused only more confusion in Remus.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Lupin asked firmly and evenly. "Is who dead?"

Harry knew he was succumbing to the panic running through him, but the idea that he had killed someone and that person was Draco's father was just too horrible.

"Did I kill Lucius Malfoy?" he asked frantically.

At last understanding dawned in Remus' face and profound sympathy replaced the confusion.

"Oh, Harry," the werewolf said with a catch in his voice that sent despair into the Hecatemus.

Harry knew the answer now; there was blood on his hands, the ex-DADA professor's expression could mean nothing else.

"No, Harry," Remus was firm and definitely, "you didn't kill that evil bastard."

The venom in the werewolf's voice was almost enough to drag Harry back from the emotional turmoil that was threatening to overwhelm him.

"You put him in St Mungo's," Remus said as Harry looked up into the older man's face from where he was now sitting on the floor, "but you didn't kill him. Ron told us what happened, and whatever the curse was when it hit Malfoy, it was not the same as the one he cast. He's unconscious and under heavy guard, but he is still alive."

The relief drew a chocked sob out of Harry and arms closed around him from behind as Draco moved in close. The moment his soul mate had him Remus withdrew and Harry wrapped himself in his lover's embrace.

[Even if he was dead it wouldn't make any difference,] Draco's voice told him silently. [You defended yourself. Never forget that.]

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When Harry had run from him, it had made the most terrible feeling course through Draco; that was until his sleepy mind had caught up with the complete desperation in his soul mate. The emotions running through Harry had been so raw that they were almost stunning and it had taken long seconds before the Slytherin's thoughts had put themselves in any sort of order. After that Draco had dragged his still very sore body from the bed and limped after his disappearing lover intent on comforting him no matter what the truth of the situation. A part of him had harboured the desire to one day be reconciled to his family even though he had known what Lucius was, but that part was dead. All that remained was focused completely on Harry, and it had torn his heart in two when he had moved to the door and seen his soul mate collapsing in the arms of Remus Lupin.

It had been surprising how fast he found he could move when he had heard the sob coming from Harry, even though the remembrances of his injuries still bothered him. He had needed to comfort his soul mate as much as Harry had needed comforting and the move back to their bed was rather lost in the sea of emotions which had been buffeting them both. Harry had not been what Draco would have called coherent as the shock of what he had remembered ran its course and Draco recalled very little but trying to cope with this. There had been three people helping, of that much he was sure, and Madame Pomfrey had dosed both him and Harry up with something, but he had no clear memory of the other two until he woke again.

It was still night, that much Draco realised as soon as he opened his eyes, or at least the lights in their room were down at the normal night time level. The enchanted candles never fully went out in the hospital wing in case Madame Pomfrey needed to do rounds in the middle of the night, but they burned with very low flames. The second thing he concluded was that the potion he had been given had been dreamless sleep since he recognised the slightly muzzy sensation behind his eyes that it always left him with and lastly, but not least, he realised who the other two people had been, mostly because they were still in residence.

The door was once again closed, but two chairs had been brought into the room and placed just inside the entrance. On them sat a tired looking Remus Lupin and a dozing Tonks. If it hadn't been quite such a shock to find anyone in the room Draco might have found the scene quite sweet since the Auror had her head on the werewolf's shoulder. As it was, the Slytherin's instinctive reaction was to give his soul mate a quick mental once over and he did not relax again until he was sure Harry was not reacting adversely to either presence in their sanctuary. Only after this did the young man look over to Remus and meet gazes with the werewolf.

"Thank you," Draco said quietly, "for everything you did last night."

Lupin smiled at him for the thanks and the expression changed his whole demeanour. When Remus had been their DADA teacher back in the third year Draco had despised him for being poor and tatty round the edges. What the young Slytherin had never seen and his older self was fully aware of was the

power that Lupin's rather unkempt exterior hid so well, and the reliability and intelligence that lived within the man sitting across the room. It had only taken Draco a few hours during the Christmas holidays to realise how completely he had underestimated the werewolf and he saw it again now.

"You're welcome," was Remus' understated reply. "Madam Pomfrey did not wish either of you to damage yourselves with over exertion. She was going to stay herself, but we volunteered and convinced her otherwise."

Draco nodded his acknowledgement and briefly considered going back to sleep since it was most likely the foreign presences in the room which had woken him in the first place, but Harry beat him to the line. The dreamless sleep potion was obviously no longer in effect as Harry also swam towards consciousness and Draco waited patiently until his soul mate was almost there. Then, before Harry had a chance to really remember what had happened the previous night the Slytherin wrapped his lover in a warm mental embrace which brought him from sleep with a genuine smile on his face. The expression was worth every effort Draco had to put in to place it there.

"I did not mean to wake you," he said gently with a smile of his own, "but since you are awake, we have visitors."

It would not have taken Harry long to figure out this on his own, but Draco knew what he was doing and he chose to control the situation and hence his lover's reaction to it. Draco could feel and see it the moment Harry's thoughts caught up with the events of the night and the smile slipped slowly off his face, but the feeling of well being Draco had worked hard to create could not be beaten completely. The turmoil of emotions Harry had been prey to before the potion had done its work threatened for a moment, but subsided again quickly.

"Hello, Remus," Harry greeted quietly, "sorry about running into you like that."

"Not a problem, Harry," the werewolf replied with a warm smile, "we all have our moments. It was lucky you didn't run into Tonks or we'd have been picking up bits of both of you from all over the hospital wing."

"I heard that," the young Auror's sleepy voice said as she slowly raised her head from Lupin's shoulder.

That drew another smile from Harry which made Draco happier than he cared to express. If Harry could do that without his lover's mental interference then the crisis was truly over. The last thing they needed was yet more emotional baggage to tie them down. It was as the Auror sat up and stretched, managing to hit Lupin on the arm with a cream contrivance on her arm that Draco saw Harry frown. The emotion coming off the Hecatemus was, however, concern rather than anything darker.

"Tonks," Harry asked, obviously a little confused, "why is your arm in plaster?"

The Auror appeared inexplicably embarrassed by the question which intrigued Draco no end.

"Um, I broke it," the young woman said rather awkwardly.

The grin that spread across Remus' face did nothing to dissuade the Slytherin of the idea that there was more of a story to the cast than that.

"Go on, Tonks," the werewolf said with a mischievous light in his eyes, "tell them how you broke it. They could do with a laugh."

"I should drag you in for wilful obstruction of an Auror," the woman grouched at that, but she did smile in resignation.

This was going to be good, Draco could tell.

"It happened after the battle in the dungeon," Tonks said rather reluctantly.

"And how," Remus gained a glare for his comment.

"Okay, okay," the Auror said, throwing her arms into the air and narrowly missing the werewolf with the cast, "I fell over one of the unconscious Death Eaters when we were doing the clear up."

For a moment Draco was not sure he had heard correctly and then he felt the smile work its way onto his face. The mental image in his mind was just too absurd; after an all out assault on a Death Eater strong hold, which, from the looks of things, Tonks had escaped without a scratch, one of the Ministry's finest had damaged herself by tripping over the fallen enemy. Draco couldn't help himself; he laughed and Harry seemed to have the same idea since a small chuckle was drawn from the Hecatemus as well.

"But that still doesn't explain the plaster cast," his soul mate said, recovering from his mirth rapidly. "Madame Pomfrey can fix bones in minutes."

"Ah well, yes, now that's not my fault," Tonks said brightly, "and it's the reason I'm still here. Due to my unusual physiology the normal bone healing spells have an adverse reaction and although I could change the shape of the bone it's fundamentally broken which I can't fix. So I have to have some of the older remedies which take a little longer. The cast should be off tomorrow and your school healer wouldn't let me go home until she was sure everything was okay."

"Sounds like Madame Pomfrey," Draco commented lightly.

"She'll never change," the Auror agreed with a smile.

He had been lying propped up on one elbow, but he took the opportunity to slowly sit up fully. He could still feel the strain and damage his body had been put through, but the aches were nothing he wasn't used to after a hard Quidditch match. His mind shied away from the causes of his injuries and the concerned look Harry gave him did not escape his notice.

[Just aching,] Draco assured his soul mate silently, [I'm fine.]

There was still a slight cloud in Harry's eyes, but the Hecatemus chose not to comment, which was probably a good thing as Draco could imagine the mutual over protective discussion they could end up in just at that moment. Instead Harry sat up as well; from the expression on his face and the grimace that passed across his features he was feeling his own injuries as well.

"It so bloody annoying not knowing why you ache like buggery," was Harry's distinct comment on the matter.

"Right now I'd rather not know," Draco replied dryly.

"Can I get you anything?" Remus asked instantly. "I'm sure Madame Pomfrey has some muscle relaxants somewhere."

For a moment Draco considered the offer as did Harry, but at the same time they both shook their heads. If Quidditch had taught them anything it was that letting the discomfort run its course now would be far the better option in the long run.

"No thank you," Harry replied and gingerly swung his legs out of bed, "but if you don't mind I just have to use to bathroom."

At the reminder, Draco's bladder made itself known as well and he followed his lover as quickly as his abused body would allow.

"Back in a sec," he offered as he slipped into the bathroom behind Harry and closed the door.

When the pair returned it was to find steaming cups of tea and a large plate of hot toast on the beside table.

"Madame Pomfrey said you'd probably be ravenous when you woke up," Tonks said cheerfully from where she was munching her own bit of toast and jam, "and it's nearly breakfast time so we thought we'd indulge."

That was all the encouragement Draco's stomach required and if the way Harry dived on the food was anything to go by Harry was in total agreement. The next few minutes were filled by munching and pleasant conversation, but, as he ate, Draco could not help noticing that Remus appeared to be becoming more uncomfortable by the moment. It did not escape Harry's notice either and the Slytherin knew his lover would not be able to stay silent for long.

"What is it, Remus?" Harry asked eventually, giving his friend a warm smile.

"It's nothing," the werewolf replied, and Draco raised an eyebrow at that.

Not even Fudge would have believed he could get away with a reply like that. Harry gave the other man a long hard look and after a few moments Lupin caved.

"It was just that when you came out of the bathroom," the werewolf said guiltily, "you looked so much like James and I couldn't help remembering."

Harry's face filled with understanding.

"Oh," Harry said with a nod, "and thinking of James you were reminded of the Marauders and from there of Sirius."

To some it would have seemed quite a jump, but Draco did not need to be psychic to know that Harry had hit the nail on the head. The werewolf had gone pale, but the man nodded at the truth of the statement.

"I think I owe you an explanation," Harry said firmly and broke Lupin out of his melancholy with a start.

Once the topic of Harry's godfather had been broached, Draco had expected no less of his lover, and he was not surprised that they would be discussing this now. It would not be the most fun conversation, but of the possible subjects this was not the worst. Taking his half drunk cup of tea, Draco settled back against

the headboard and prepared for a deluge of questions. It was going to be a long morning.

Chapter 37 Apologies

It took days before the pair could bear to be out of each other's sight and they stayed together through everything including interviews with Aurors for the official records and talking with their friends and house heads. It was also well over a week before they could go anywhere without the other for any amount of time. Both Harry and Draco decided that they needed to overcome the irrational need to be in each other's company the entire time and they set their minds to returning to normal as quickly as possible. Over time they both found their memories returning as well, which was hard on them both, but they faced it together and the nightmares did not keep them awake every night.

With his returning memory came the realisation that Harry had been nasty to quite a few people when he had been separated from Draco. None of them appeared to blame him for it, but it didn't help his guilt at all. His soul mate had tried to convince him that it was not his fault and he should forget about it, but even Draco had finally realised that remorse was something that Harry just did.

"If it will make you feel better, apologise," had been his soul mate's honest opinion.

So Harry decided to do just that: Dumbledore walked into his office three days after Harry chose to make amends to find a large selection of Honeyduke's best sweets on his desk, so large in fact that it covered the whole surface of the piece of furniture; Madame Pomfrey was presented with three vials of different, somewhat difficult to come by healing potions by owl; Professor McGonagall found a small, very old book about ancient shape changing rituals wrapped in tissue paper in her office; Professor Snape entered his rooms to find several new jars of some of his rarer potions ingredients sitting on the sideboard; Remus Lupin walked into his kitchen to find a copy of the diaries of one Jemima Cranbrook, the only Hecatema in history to have married a werewolf; Tonks found a new set of everyday robes in lurid pink on the bed of the guest room in which she was staying which made her chortle with laughter; Ron woke up to find a five year subscription to Quidditch Weekly sitting on his beside table; Hermione opened her eyes to see a complete, new set of "Arithmancy - Advanced Magic by Numbers" books which she had been borrowing from the library all year, next to her bed done up with a ribbon; and lastly Cornelius Fudge received a letter by owl where Harry apologised for his behaviour, but not the sentiments behind it.

It had taken every spare minute of the three days leading up to these events to prepare, and long hours to compose the notes that went with each gift, but when he had finished, Harry felt very pleased with himself. His actions assuaged his guilt, but they did not remove it entirely, as Draco put it, he was far too much of a Gryffindor for that. After the thank yous from his friends the aftermath of the whole event could actually be summed up by Ron's question at breakfast:

"Just how loaded are you?"

Draco had nearly choked on the bacon he had just stolen from Hermione as he tried to laugh and eat at the same time. Harry went red and hedged around the question.

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Everyone accepted the gifts graciously, sending him a note saying thank you, he shouldn't have done and he was forgiven and those sort of things, everyone except Snape. The Potions Master's note had simply told Harry to be in Snape's

office at five after his last class. He turned up on the dot feeling like his life was about to end and knocked on the door.

"Come in," Snape's cool tones greeted him.

As he entered, shutting the door behind him, Harry could not help but notice that the four jars of ingredients that he had sent the Slytherin head were sitting on the desk in a neat row.

"Potter," the professor greeted and stood up.

"Professor Snape," Harry returned in kind.

There was a moment's silence as Snape walked round his desk to stand beside where he had placed the jars.

"What exactly are these?" the man asked and flicked his hand past the containers.

"Potions ingredients," Harry tried hopefully.

Snape looked at him coolly for that reply and Harry had to admit it was rather literal.

"I know that," the professor said pointedly, "now answer the question."

"Didn't you get the note?" Harry asked, suddenly worried that Snape would misconstrue the whole thing.

"All the note said was 'I'm sorry, Potter.'," Snape said evenly.

Harry opened his mouth to reply and then shut it again for a moment. He realised that possibly the note had been a little short, but he had had no idea what to say to the man. They didn't like each other, the only reason they ever had a civil conversation was because of Draco and Harry really didn't know how to talk to Snape.

"That's what they are," he said eventually, "an apology. I remember biting your head off at least twice when we were going after Draco and I'm trying to make it up to people."

Snape looked genuinely surprised for a moment until his normal mask slipped into place. It occurred to Harry then, that maybe apologies were not something the older wizard received very often.

"You feel guilty for a perfectly natural reaction?" Snape said slowly. "Potter, sometimes you amaze even me. Your bond with Mr Malfoy was under the Dissaepius curse; that you were sentient at all is an indication of your character. You have nothing for which to apologise."

It took Harry a moment to realise that Snape might actually have just given him a compliment.

"That's what Draco said," the words came out of his mouth before he thought about it.

"Yes well, young Mr Malfoy has always been the brighter of you two," Snape said with a raise of an eyebrow.

"But I do have something to apologise for," Harry insisted firmly. "It wasn't just what I said; it's what I have done in the past."

Snape obviously had not expected his words because the professor actually showed open surprise.

"I have owed you an apology since I invaded your privacy two years ago. There was no excuse for what I did, but despite the hype I am only human and I was an angry fifteen year old, so all I can do is say I'm sorry," Harry said honestly. "I can't pretend that I like you, but I do respect you, and the things I said were uncalled for."

The fact that Harry had done more than just talk did enter into his head, but he was not ready to cross that bridge yet. Snape turned and walked back behind his desk.

"You must take these back, Mr Potter," he said coolly.

"No," Harry said instantly and then remembered who he was talking to when Snape's expression hardened. "When I make an ass out of myself in front of my friends I like to make up for it. The jars are yours."

"These are very expensive ingredients," Snape began to say, but Harry was having none of it.

"That has nothing to do with it," he said quickly, "I just bought what I thought you needed. If I got it wrong you can change them, but I will not take them back."

The two regarded each other in silence for a few moments neither willing to back down, but eventually Snape looked away.

"Apology accepted," he said shortly. "You may go."

Then Snape sat down in his chair and left Harry standing there knowing he'd won, but not really feeling like it was his victory. The head of Slytherin really was the most frustrating man. Eventually Harry turned to leave at a loss for anything else to say.

"Oh, Potter," Snape said just as he reached the door.

The young man turned to look back at the professor.

"Did you just insinuate that I was your friend?" the tone was icy, but the look in Snape's eyes was unreadable.

Harry did not know what to say for a moment as he realised that that was precisely what he had said.

"Yes, Professor, I did," he said eventually. "You have risked more for me in the last year than I can ever repay. If you need my help for anything, all you have to do is ask."

Then he left. Harry doubted that he and Snape would ever particularly like each other, but that wasn't always the definition of a friend.

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The note turned up at breakfast with no signature, but in a very familiar hand. Draco did not look over at the Slytherin table after he read the message since he knew exactly who it was from and passed it to Harry calmly. As his lover read, Draco watched Harry's face and saw the frown developing, which was not a surprise. After all, the note said "It was not us. Meet me tonight, usual place. I need to speak to you."

"You are not going alone," Harry said firmly and Draco met his soul mate's gaze firmly.

"I wasn't planning on it," he said honestly and managed to catch his lover off guard, which made him smile. "You're coming with me, it's time Pansy came to terms with you and me anyway, and we can use your cloak to our advantage as well."

He looked over to where Ron was pretending not to be listening and smiled innocently.

"How do you fancy a bit of undercover surveillance, Weasley?" he asked calmly, at which point the redhead discarded all pretence of ignoring the pair and turned towards them both.

"Sure," Ron said instantly and, from there, the plan took shape.

Hence, that evening found Harry and Draco waiting in the out-of-the-way classroom for Pansy to arrive with Ron in one corner under Harry's cloak and Hermione in another behind an unused cupboard, both with wands drawn.

"She's coming," Harry said calmly as Draco watched the door, and the Slytherin walked back to his lover slowly.

He wanted to make a very specific impression and it started with being as close to his soul mate when Pansy entered as possible. The moment the young woman walked through the door, Draco knew he had succeeded in his initial message, because Pansy looked momentarily annoyed but then resigned. It was obvious that she did not like the fact that Harry was there, but it was also clear she was not about to object.

"Hello, Pansy," Draco said calmly, "you called, we came."

The Slytherin girl let her gaze wander over Harry dismissively and then looked back at her fellow prefect before she chose to speak.

"I am beginning to see your point about the Dark Lord," Pansy said slowly. "Your father..."

"Not my father anymore," Draco snapped coldly, on that point he would make no compromise.

"Lucius'," Pansy corrected as if she understood his view, "choice of action was irrational at best, insane at worst and we are all aware who's orders he was following."

Draco lifted one eyebrow calmly; his old friend's words were a little too up front for a Slytherin.

"And pray tell, Pansy," he said evenly, "how can I be sure it was not you who allowed Lucius access to Hogwarts?"

The young woman frowned in distaste, but Draco did not think it was at him.

"Because I am about to break the first rule," Pansy said pointedly, "I am about to give information about Slytherin to an outsider."

That grabbed and held Draco's attention since if there was one thing that was drummed into every Slytherin from day one it was that you could do what you liked inside the house, but you never took it outside to others. He did not reply, it would not have been prudent, but he indicated that Pansy should go on.

"After I found out that you were supposed to be meeting me when you were kidnapped I used a few spells," Pansy said obviously uncomfortable with what she was doing. "Someone must have suspected what we were doing. I found the remnants of tracing spells on my things; very sophisticated tracing charms that are beyond most of our classmates."

"Well, opening the wards to let Lucius in was beyond most of our classmates as well," Draco replied dryly. "It is safe to assume someone is not what they seem."

Pansy nodded her agreement.

"It is a seventh year," the girl said firmly and managed to surprise her housemate and he and Harry shared a glance.

Draco had expected Pansy to deny all knowledge of the plot; in fact she was low on his list of suspects, but he had not expected her to be of help in the effort to track down the traitor in the midst of Hogwarts.

"I tracked the charms back," Pansy told then evenly. "The only people with opportunity are the seventh years, and it was definitely a Slytherin."

"I take it you have proof of what you're saying," Draco said calmly.

The young woman produced a wad of parchment from her robes and walked up to Draco; handing him the notes she moved back to her original position.

"Those are all my observations," Pansy said without the usual cagey manner Draco expected from members of his house. "They are all I can manage without drawing attention to myself. So far all they have on me is that I was talking to you, I will not make myself a target."

"You have to choose sometime," Draco did not blame Harry as his lover chose to speak, but he knew it would not sway the young woman in front of them.

"And I shall," Pansy replied acidly, "when I know which side will keep me alive longer. At the moment the light appears to be the better choice and you may have noticed I am giving you my assistance, but, Potter, I am a Slytherin and I will not show my cards until absolutely necessary."

An underlying current of annoyance ran through Harry and Draco placed a hand on his soul mate's arm, but, from the look his lover gave him, the Slytherin knew Harry was not about to say anything else anyway.

"I assume you will let me know if you find out anything else," Draco said evenly.

Pansy just smiled, they both knew the answer to that question; Draco would receive any information if the girl thought it was in her own best interest.

"Goodbye, Draco," she said with a slight smile. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you survived. You're far too pretty to die so young."

And before the young wizard could reply Pansy turned and left the way she had come. That was not something he had expected to come out of his old friend's mouth, well not since the Yule ball, and it rather shocked him. When he turned to Harry he was even more surprised as his soul mate burst out laughing.

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Draco looked up from his revision sheet as Harry walked into their room. His lover looked pensive and there was a vague sense of unease coming from him.

[What is it?] Draco asked, frowning.

[Your mother's here,] Harry replied with uncertainty in his mental voice. [She's already threatened to kill Lucius if she ever gets her hands on him, and she wants to see you.]

For a moment Draco's thoughts ground to a stop. He had not seen his mother since the previous Summer when she had been standing directly behind his father sending him off to school. In the time since, she had not written or tried to contact him in any way apart from the one letter dictated by Lucius and Draco had assumed she had disowned him. The fact that she actually wanted to see him was mind blowing and once his thoughts started moving again they exploded in complete turmoil. Harry came and sat next to him wrapping him in both a physical and a mental embrace.

[Do you know what she wants?] Draco asked eventually.

[I didn't see her,] Harry admitted, [if I had you probably could have felt the emotional spike from here to China. One of the second years just ran over with a note from Dumbledore. She's waiting for you in his office.]

Draco just let his thoughts wander through the many possibilities that had jumped into his head for a while. He really didn't know what to think. His mother had spoiled him all his life until last Summer when things in the household had changed. When Draco had refused to be part of his father's plans for the coming year and the man had used the Cruciatus curse on his son for the first time, Narcissa had withdrawn from her child. Draco had assumed she was upset with him, but even when he had pretended to go along with Lucius she had not returned to the doting mother he had known all his life. Her appearing now after Lucius had so publicly been displayed as a Death Eater for a second time filled Draco with worry.

"Will you come with me?" he asked quietly as he stared at the floor.

"I'll be wherever you want me to be, Draco," Harry whispered back firmly.

With a look at Harry's worried green eyes Draco nodded and made his decision.

"Let's go then," he said quickly and put his notes to the side.

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Narcissa Malfoy looked as beautiful as the day Harry had seen her at the Quidditch world cup, only this time her beauty was not marred by a sneer. In fact she appeared somewhat serene, which caused a shot of surprise to go through Draco. When she looked up and saw her son it was like a light illuminating her face: there was actually joy in her expression. That caused even more shock in Draco, the echo of which took Harry along for the ride.

"Oh," the woman said and immediately rose from her chair, "how you've changed this last year."

Then she moved across the room so fast neither Harry nor Draco had time to react and before his soul mate could move Draco was enveloped in his mother's arms. Harry saw him tense and the conflicting emotions that ran through his lover were incredible. Draco was obviously having as much of a problem figuring out what was going on as Harry was.

Not sure what else to do, Harry lowered his mental barrier to emotions a little and let the colours through. The moment he saw Draco and his mother, Harry knew he had to show his lover the truth. Flashing a mental picture of what he was looking at to his other half, Harry watched Draco relax into his mother's embrace: he was as tall as his parent, but somehow he seemed to shrink back to a small boy in her arms. The woman was literally glowing gold with the love for her son.

"I've missed you so much," she cooed into Draco's hair and Harry could see her eyes tearing up, "but after what your father did I didn't dare see you."

The blond youth pulled free of his mother's arms looking angry.

"He hurt you?" Draco's voice held an edge to it that bordered on violent hatred.

It was funny, Harry had never heard or felt that from him before, even after what Lucius had done to Draco. His soul mate had been angry and hurt, and he refused to acknowledge that he had a father, but at the suggestion of injury to his mother the firey emotion jumped out of Draco.

"No, Draco," Narcissa said quietly, cupping her son's face in her hands, "one thing your father is not guilty of is harming me. But last Summer I saw how far he would go to bend you to his will and I knew he would use me to make you obey him. I could not let that happen so I shut you out."

"You could have left him," Draco said almost desperately.

He was trying to understand, Harry could feel it, but there was a sense of betrayal in him and Draco did not seem to be able to move past it.

"I thought I could bring him back even after everything he had done," Narcissa said in no more than a whisper. "I thought I could keep him from what he has become, but the Dark Lord's hold was too strong. I should have come to you, Draco," she said earnestly, "but I didn't want to see what a monster he had grown to be. For what he did to you I would kill him myself."

Tears were rolling down her face now and Harry felt Draco's sense of loss melt away and he leaned back into his mother's arms. Harry did not know what to do as his soul mate clung to his parent like his life depended on it. Draco's emotions were all over the place and if it had not been for Malfoy pride Harry knew his lover would be crying just like his mother.

Eventually Narcissa looked up from where she had buried her face in her son's hair and grey eyes very similar to Draco's fixed him with a look. Harry felt like he was being appraised and then finally Draco's mother gave a small smile. When Draco finally pulled away Narcissa looked into his eyes.

"Well, My Darling Boy," she said her composure returning, "at least you chose the best of the other side."

That caused a spike of amusement to run through Draco and he actually gave a small laugh. Harry thought he now knew where his lover inherited his warped sense of humour.

"Narcissa Malfoy," she said extending her hand towards Harry as if they had never seen each other before, "I don't believe we've ever been properly introduced."

"Pleased to meet you," Harry said calmly, playing along.

He took her hand lightly and, feeling the need to meet the Malfoy charm head on, he deftly bowed and kissed the back of her fingers.

"And such manners," Narcissa said warmly.

[I didn't know you had it in you, Potter,] Draco's voice said dryly in his mind, [you'll be telling me you have designs on my mother next.]

[Shut up, Malfoy,] was Harry's response.

"Tea, anyone?" Dumbledore asked and drew everyone's attention.

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It was quite obvious to Draco that Harry did not really know how to react around his mother. For that matter he was a little flustered by the whole situation as well. His mother had always been one for shows of affection at home, behind closed doors, and for big displays of overt indulgence of her offspring by buying him large gifts outside the Manor, but she had never shown the kind of attention she was showing now in public. As the three had moved through the school, having been given leave to show Narcissa around and make use of Hogwarts facilities, his mother was continually reaching out to touch him. She would touch his hair and embrace him at the oddest moments and Harry had found himself on the end of her exhibitions of affection on more than one occasion as well.

This was a side to his mother that Draco had never experienced before and he was beginning to see how much Lucius had curtailed the woman's actions. Once Narcissa's behaviour would have horrified him, but now he found her lack of proprietary absolutely wonderful. They received many curious glances from around the school and Draco was not inclined to hide the joy he felt at the return of his parent. By the time the small party headed through the Gryffindor common room and up to Harry and Draco's room, all three were quite used to the stares

they received from students. The whole school was probably talking about the return of Narcissa Malfoy if their usual reaction to anything involving the bonded pair was anything to go by.

Harry waved at Ron who was sitting in the corner of the common room as the three walked through, and Draco sent the redhead a beaming smile in greeting as he disappeared up the tower steps. Weasley appeared quite shocked by the whole experience and the Slytherin made a mental note to flabbergast his friend more often, since he did a most amusing impression of a goldfish. When the three entered the room, Draco was incredibly glad he had bullied Harry into helping tidy up only the evening before.

"A Slytherin refuge in Gryffindor tower," his mother commented with a smile as Draco hurried to move a chair for her to sit down. "I think I approve."

Her laugh was light as she took the offered seat and then Draco moved to the bed where Harry was hovering. They sat down rather like a synchronised pair of animate bookends, which caused his mother to smile even more. The delight she seemed to be taking in everything he and Harry did was rather disconcerting to Draco.

"Thank you for the tour," his mother said politely and glanced around the room, "and thank you for welcoming me into your haven. I fear that I do not deserve it."

Draco would have said something in response, but Harry seemed to be thinking faster than he was ever since the news of his parent's arrival had reached him and the Hecatemus was on his feet once more.

"Mrs Malfoy," Harry said formally even though he had been instructed to call her Narcissa or Mum several times already, "we're very glad to have you here. You have no idea how glad I was to see what I saw when we walked into the headmaster's office today; Draco has missed you so much."

Then much to his mother's surprise Draco watched as Harry threw his arms around her and gave her a warm hug. It was just like Harry to go from formal to completely the opposite in a heartbeat and Draco couldn't help but smile.

"Oh Merlin," his parent said blinking hard, "if you keep doing things like that, Harry, I'm going to cry again."

The bashful Gryffindor part of his soul mate came to the forefront then and Harry appeared at a loss as to how to react to that, which was so typically him; starting something and then having no idea how to finish it. Draco really didn't know what to say either so he just beamed at the pair of them.

"Well, yes," Narcissa said brightly, regaining her composure quickly, "Draco, I have something for you."

At which point she pulled out a small box from a hidden pocket in her robes and handed it to her son.

"What is it?" Draco asked, not sure what could possibly be in the black container.

"What should have been yours on your seventeenth birthday," his mother replied calmly and the Slytherin's eyes fell back to the box.

The object was sealed with wax and Draco reached into his pocket for his knife to open it. When he revealed the utensil in his fingers his mother's hand went to her mouth and she made a small sound of pleasure.

"Oh," she said, her eyes fixed on the knife, "you liked it."

Draco looked at the blade in his hand where Calonis was stirring sleepily to peer at the world and then back at his mother. It was all suddenly so obvious and he couldn't believe he hadn't seen it before. Who but someone who loved him would have sent such a precious gift?

"I love it," Draco replied honestly, "I carry it everywhere with me. Thank you."

"I could not let your birthday go without sending you a gift," his mother said, her eyes never leaving the knife, "but I had to be very careful that your father did not find out."

"It caused quite a debate when it arrived," Draco told her, unwilling to dwell on the thought of Lucius and not wishing to tell his mother that he no longer considered the man his father.

He looked back at the box and carefully split the seal with the blade. There sitting on a bed of black velvet was a blood red ruby with the design of a dragon magically formed into its surface.

"Your father and I had this made on the day of your birth," his mother explained calmly, "a little part of each of us was placed in the jewel as a gift for you when you came of age. It is a little late and you may not wish a part of your father, but he was a different man when this was created and in it is only his love for you. It is a token with little magical value, but I wanted you to have it."

So far Draco had managed to keep the tears which had threatened several times that afternoon at bay, but on seeing the ruby he could hold them back no longer. The token of affection was all that was needed to finally crack his iron control and he felt the first tear fall as joy at the return of his mother caused his heart to burst. Two pairs of arms enveloped him as he closed his eyes and squeezed the jewel in his hand and at that moment he had everything he could possibly want in the entire world.

Chapter 38 Traitors and Heroes

Harry was late: the exam began in half an hour and he was supposed to meet Draco ten minutes ago in the library. It was actually Draco's exam not Harry's, but he had to be there and Draco had some rather elaborate traditions he always went through before such an important test. Personally Harry had always tended to just turn up when he had a test or an exam, but Draco was far more organised and Harry did not object to participating in his lover's eccentricities.

[I'm waiting,] Draco's mental voice said coolly.

[I know,] Harry replied apologetically, [how many times can I say I'm sorry. I couldn't exactly tell Professor McGonagall to go away.]

He was so wrapped up in trying to make it up to Draco that he was not paying attention to where he was going. Most people moved out of his way: Harry Potter running down a corridor with a slightly vacant expression on his face had gained a reputation and the other pupils had learned self preservation, but today someone was not looking in the right direction. Harry rounded a corner and collided quite heavily with another boy. Off balance both young men grabbed at each other to prevent themselves falling over and Harry snapped back to his surroundings staring into the face of Blaise Zabini.

"Potter, do you ever look where you are going?" the cool words of Professor Snape, to whom the Slytherin had been talking, made it into Harry's brain, but barely.

Something much more demanding was taking all of Harry's attention: the blinding hatred that was pouring off Zabini. Harry had felt the emotion before; just before Christmas in Honeydukes, but it seemed to be even more overpowering now. His barriers were quite stable these days, but the emotion running through Blaise was so pure and so consuming that Harry's control faltered and his vision changed. The other youth's eyes went black with undisguised loathing and Harry felt his mind being dragged in by the dark pools. He could not let go and he could not stop the images which piled into his mind.

Harry had never connected to any other mind than Draco's before and with Zabini it was not a pleasant experience. It did not take him more than a moment to realise that there was something very strange about the Slytherin. As mental pictures assailed Harry's mind it felt as if they were coming from more than one at the same time. The hatred brought with it images of Harry's imagined death in several gruesome ways and images of Lucius Malfoy, but there were other pictures as well: totally unrelated and not linked to the overriding emotion.

Harry struggled against the confusing rush of information and finally managed to convince his finger's to release Zabini's arms. He stepped back from the Slytherin, trying to regain his equilibrium and as his mind calmed down a little it slowly dawned on him.

"It was you," he said quietly as his thoughts coalesced to show him the truth, "you weakened the wards for Malfoy."

Zabini's face twisted in a grotesque mirror of the ugly emotion running through his mind and he reached for his wand.

"Stupefacio," the spell did not come from Blaise's mouth and the boy collapsed into a heap.

Harry turned to see Professor Snape with his wand in his hand. It had all happened so quickly that he didn't quite know how to react and his head was spinning.

"Are you all right, Potter?" the potions master asked evenly.

He knew he probably looked like a mental case just at the moment, but Harry couldn't quite catch his spinning thoughts to put them in a sensible order.

"I think I need to sit down," he managed eventually as shock began to take over his system.

As if on cue, his knees wobbled and he found himself sliding down the wall. Harry felt like he'd been hit in the head with a bludger as he bumped into the ground. Linking into Draco's mind was the most natural thing he ever did, linking into Blaise's mind was one of the most alien; he did not want to repeat the experience ever, if he could help it.

"Potter," Snape's voice was somewhat irritated.

The hatred had been so overpowering that it had chased everything else out of Harry's head and his psyche had been stunned. Too much information had been passed on at one time and the young man's mind tried to catch up and process it, leaving it little room for anything else.

"Harry," Snape's voice was gentler this time, "I must see to Zabini, will you be all right for a moment?"

It took a second or two for Harry's brain to parse the question, but eventually he nodded. He was peripherally aware of Snape moving over to Blaise, removing the unconscious boy's wand and then casting ropes to restrain him.

"He's not himself," Harry said suddenly, feeling that it was important as his mind provided him with the facts. "They put another mind inside him: it is the Death Eater not the real Blaise. He didn't know."

Professor Snape turned to look at him evenly.

"Think very carefully, Potter," the potions master said slowly, "are you telling me that Blaise Zabini has been acting under another's will?"

Was that what he was saying? Harry had just verbalised the information his brain had provided; he had not considered what that meant. Slowly he nodded: it was something like that, only darker than the Imperius curse.

"Sort of," he said, not really able to explain just at that moment.

This affirmation changed the look in Snape's eyes from one of anger to something akin to compassion: Harry didn't have the brain power to figure that one out just at that moment.

The sound of running feet interrupted that particular train of thought and Draco came skidding around the corner. Harry's mind had been so stunned that he hadn't even had the mental awareness to reassure his lover that he was okay and his soul mate appeared almost frantic.

"Harry," Draco sank down beside Harry and reached for him urgently.

He accepted the touch gratefully; closing his eyes and Draco's mental presence enveloped him and pushed away the lingering tendrils of remembered hatred. They remained that way for long seconds not talking, not even really thinking, just letting Harry's confused mind find its equilibrium. Slowly the experience faded and reality began to re-establish itself in his mind. He opened his eyes and found himself forehead to forehead with Draco.

[Thanks,] Harry said gratefully.

His lover did not reply and just let Harry feel the relief that was running through him: it expressed everything he could have said.

"Gentlemen," Snape's voice snapped Harry out of his reverie.

The pair turned to where the potion's master was standing with Blaise Zabini's still unconscious body levitating by his side.

"Neither of you appear in any state for an exam," he said evenly, "so you will accompany me to the hospital wing. There Madame Pomfrey will make sure there are no after effects from contact with Mr Zabini. I will arrange for Mr Malfoy to take his exam at a later date and I will alert the Headmaster to this development."

[Don't even think of protesting,] Draco's mental voice warned silently, [you cannot sit in an exam room now and there is no way I'd get any work done.]

For once they were in total agreement and Harry let himself be helped to his feet.

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The fact that they had missed the exam and their fellow seventh years had not meant that as soon as Madame Pomfrey had examined them both the couple were placed in isolation. The easiest place to do this was their old room in the hospital wing, although it was a little different to their usual occupancy. The wards were not activated since there was no need for them; the door was not locked; and the summoning alcove was disabled to prevent any contact with the outside world. As required by the exam boards, someone was by the door the entire time and the prefects from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw who had already finished their exams were being used for that purpose.

Since extra revision time would also have been considered an advantage the pair had nothing inside the room but themselves, not even their text books, which could have led to a very boring afternoon and evening. It would have been as well if Draco's over protective attitude of Harry, and the Hecatemus' own coping mechanism for the earlier incident hadn't resulted in Harry becoming somewhat hot and bothered. Draco had then opened the door, told the prefect on duty not to come in and not to let anyone else in no matter what they heard, closed the door again and then set about making Harry feel a whole lot better about being stuck in a virtually empty room.

After that Harry had fallen asleep curled up next to his lover and would have been quite happy to remain that way until dinner time if it hadn't been for an unexpected visitor. Harry was pulled from a dreamless slumber by the familiar prickling up his spine and humming in his cells that meant only one thing; Sirius was about to drop by. As Harry threw up the mental barriers to keep the

disturbance to his equilibrium to a minimum, Draco roused beside him and by the time Harry's godfather coalesced at the side of the bed both soul mates were sitting up in bed with the sheets pooling around their waists. Once Sirius appeared corporeal his expression became one of complete relief.

"Oh, thank Merlin you are both all right," the man said in a rush of words, "I was so worried."

"It's been five weeks, Snuffles," Harry said, also relieved to see that his godfather appeared to be back to how he had been before he traced Draco, "thanks to you we found Draco before it was too late. Are you okay? You looked really bad before you disappeared."

"I think I drifted for a while," Sirius said with a broad smile at the news, "but I'm dead, so I don't think there's much more I can do to myself."

Harry was not so sure since he now remembered the effect his godfather's efforts had had on the spirit in crystal clear detail, but he chose not to voice his thoughts. Sirius' condition bore a need for greater scrutiny, but now was not the time.

"Thank you," Draco said sincerely as Sirius stepped closer, "without you I think we might both be dead."

The dead wizard took the thanks silently and for a moment seemed at a loss as how to react. From what Harry knew of his godfather from before Azkaban he doubted that Sirius would have had any trouble dealing with the praise, but the man he had come to love was far deeper and he did not seem to know what to say. It was as the silence drew out that Harry saw his godfather's eyes look him up and down and then move on to Draco with a small frown.

"If it's been five weeks," Sirius finally voiced what was bothering him, "why are you two still in here? If you don't mind me saying, you don't look as if there's anything wrong with you and the wards are down."

"Oh, we're not still in here," Harry explained quickly. "We found out who opened the wards for Lucius and it meant we managed to miss our last exam so we're in isolation. We're in this room because it was the easiest place."

It was almost possible to see the thoughts running through Sirius' head as the man appeared annoyed with himself.

"And let me guess," he said with a grimace, "I've interrupted you in the middle of the night before your exam. I'm so sorry."

"Actually," Draco said leaning over to look at Harry's watch on the bed side table, "it's a little past five fifteen in the afternoon, so you have nothing to be sorry for."

That caused Sirius to stop and think again and this time Harry could not guess what the man was thinking.

"Then why on earth are you in bed?" the words were out of Harry's godfather's mouth just before his eyes opened in realisation and Harry felt his face heating up.

It was quite obvious that Sirius had just figured out the answer to his own question.

"We were bored," Draco said in a most unrepentant tone and Harry looked at his lover to find a big smile plastered all across the Slytherin's face.

For a moment Sirius just looked at Harry and then at Draco and then back again with a rather embarrassed expression on his face, but it was difficult to keep the greatest prankster in Hogwarts' History uncomfortable for long and slowly a smile to match Draco's graced the dead man's face. Harry blushed even harder, which seemed to give his lover and his godfather even more enjoyment.

"Ah, well," Sirius said lightly, "so sorry to interrupt. I'll let you boys get back to fighting the boredom."

As his godfather turned to leave it was enough to push Harry past the embarrassment.

"Wait," he said and put his hand out towards Sirius, "we were sleeping. Please stay, we don't get many chances to talk."

That drew his godfather to a halt and the playful smile disappeared into a much warmer and deeper expression. Sirius appeared thoughtful for a moment, but as Draco nodded his agreement to the request Harry's godfather acquiesced. There were so many things Harry wanted to tell Sirius that he didn't know where to start; he eventually decided to begin with the abbreviated version of Draco's rescue and move on from there.

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The summons to Dumbledore's office came just after their rescheduled last exam the day after the incident with Blaise. Harry was not surprised when it arrived and he and Draco made their way to the headmaster's office quickly. The couple entered the study to find Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Snape all there before them. The news about Blaise had so far been played down as an illness until the whole truth was known, and from the looks on the staff members' faces that was true now.

"Please come in, Gentlemen," the headmaster greeted seriously, "and close the door behind you."

Harry let Draco go first and pushed the heavy oak door back into place before following his lover further into the room. The young man nodded in greeting at his head of house and the potions master before turning his full attention to Dumbledore. The usual sparkle was dulled in the old wizard's eyes and Harry knew that the news was serious and it caused the headmaster pain. His students were very important to Dumbledore and when one fell Harry knew it cost him dearly.

"We have received the initial news from St Mungo's on Mr Zabini's condition," the professor said slowly, "and I am afraid that it has confirmed our worst fears."

Dumbledore looked kindly at Harry, but Harry could not help but feel somewhat guilty about the whole matter. After all Zabini was as much a victim as he and Draco had been if what Harry had felt about him was true.

"At some point over the Summer, Blaise was subjected to the magical insertion of an alternative personality into his mind," Dumbledore spoke calmly, but with a heavy tone in his voice. "The personality was designed to surface in all matters

relating to you, Harry. The healers have isolated the enchantment of which Mr Zabini is a victim and in time hope to remove it, but for the foreseeable future he will be confined to St Mungo's. As an unfortunate consequence of this he must be suspended from the school so that Hogwarts will view him as an interloper should someone try and use him in any form again. Hence his part in all of this must become public knowledge."

"His parents?" Draco asked evenly.

"From the information relayed to us by the Aurors," Snape spoke in his usually chilly tone, "they appear to be as at a loss to explain their son's condition as we are. Mr Zabini was sent to stay with his Grandmother over the Summer Holidays and there is some suspicion of Death Eater sympathies on that side of the family. I believe, however, that the plot may have been one of Lucius' pet projects since I was never made aware of its existence."

It was becoming increasingly obvious that Voldemort was dividing his Death Eaters and keeping their various campaigns separate, whether from direct suspicion or general paranoia was not clear. This made Snape's information only partially useful and Harry did not like the fact that the man still habitually put himself in such severe danger for the Order.

"But I don't understand," Harry admitted honestly, which caused the potions master to raise one eyebrow sardonically, "Blaise was never top of the class, how could he perform a spell to open a hole in the school wards or the complicated tracing charms Pansy found?"

"This was found in a search of Mr Zabini's dormitory," Snape said evenly and placed what looked like some form of talisman onto the desk, "among Mr Goyle's personal effects I might add."

The moment he set eyes on the device Harry knew he didn't like it. Lowering his barriers slightly to have a better look at it Harry was assaulted by the energy signature of dark, twisted magic. To his abnormal vision the object shone a very unwholesome metallic purple.

[What is it?] Draco asked, obviously sensing Harry unease and the young wizard showed his soul mate what he was seeing.

"I suggest you remove that from school grounds as soon as possible," was the Slytherin's instant reaction.

Draco was not about to mince words and Harry could feel the same distaste of the object as he was experiencing.

"What is it?" he asked, holding himself steady and refusing to obey the instinct to move away.

"A conduit of sorts," Professor McGonagall chose to take up the explanation. "Once opened by a wizard it allows another to cast a spell through the holder. The wizard being used as the channel must be totally compliant, hence the extremely difficult and dangerous addition to Mr Zabini's person. It is likely Lucius Malfoy or He Who Must Not Be Named was responsible for the spells which allowed for the attack."

Harry stared at the device in complete disgust; it was a tool to use another human being like a slave, nothing more, nothing less, and it grated against

everything the Gryffindor held dear. The young man had too much anger left over from the whole incident and with the thing in front of him he had found a focus.

"What are you going to do with it?" he asked shortly, without trying to hide what he felt about it.

"It has been magically catalogued for the Ministry," Professor Dumbledore said in a tone that suggested he agreed with Harry's distaste, "hence the presence of the three of us before you arrived. The record we have created will be taken by the Aurors as evidence and the device will be destroyed as soon as possible."

It was like music to Harry's ears.

"Would now be okay?" he asked just to make sure, and Dumbledore met his eyes before giving a swift nod.

Without even pausing to think what he was doing Harry gathered a tight ball of magic to his will and thrust out his hand at the despicable object. Light magic met dark and as with all shadows when faced with its opposite it could not stand; in a bright spout of flame the talisman was rendered to ash in under a second. It all happened so fast and yet the exertion left Harry breathing harder than normal as if he had just run round the Quidditch pitch. Draco had his hand protectively on his soul mate's arm, but the Slytherin was looking at the remains of the object on the unmarked desk with a deep satisfaction running through him. It was obvious that Draco approved.

"Thank you, Harry," the headmaster said calmly and the twinkle had returned to his eyes, "I believe that is a weight off all our minds."

Harry nodded in acknowledgement, but his thoughts were still processing everything he had been told and he did not speak.

"Was that all, Professor Dumbledore?" Draco asked politely as their business appeared to be concluded.

"Yes," the old wizard replied with a gentle smile, "I believe it is. I believe we are eating into your celebration time, I understand that Arithmancy was your last exam. Do excuse us, and do try and enjoy yourselves, Gentlemen."

It was nice of the headmaster to try and jolly them up, but Harry was not sure he could just put aside what had been explained. He let himself be led by Draco's example, but he could not manage much of a smile at Dumbledore's words.

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape," Draco said, ever mindful of his manners. "We'll take our leave then."

They were headed for the door when Harry decided there was one more thing he had to know.

"What will happen to Blaise?" he asked, turning quickly. "After they remove the other personality I mean?"

Harry saw Dumbledore consider his reply, but was glad when the headmaster nodded to himself as if he had expected the question.

"Unfortunately, because of the interference with Mr Zabini's mind, even though he had taken all his exams, his results will have to be discounted," Professor

Dumbledore spoke calmly and honestly. "Once he is pronounced of sound mind he will be invited to return to Hogwarts to complete his final year a second time."

Much to Harry's pleasure the professor's answer brought him some comfort and he finally managed a smile at the headmaster and the two heads of house.

"Good," he said shortly and then turned back to Draco, now he could begin to put the situation with Zabini out of his mind.

Chapter 39 An Ending

The exams were over, the term was almost at an end and there was nothing to do but relax. It felt good to have absolutely nothing to worry about for a change and just for a while the seventh year pupils tried to forget that they were going out into a world at war. The Wednesday before the leaving feast found a large percentage of the Gryffindor seventh year (plus their very own Slytherin) sprawled on the grass in the grounds of Hogwarts. Ron and Neville were playing wizard's chess while Seamus unhelpfully pointed out moves, Hermione was reading a book and Lavender, Harry and Draco were enjoying the warm sun.

Draco was leaning against a tree with Harry's head in his lap and his finger's absently running through his lover's nearly black hair. His soul mate had fallen asleep a few minutes earlier, but Draco was not about to let any of the other's know because Seamus would undoubtedly do his damnedest to wake him up. In the Slytherin's opinion Seamus was an idiot, but at times he could be an entertaining idiot so Draco put up with him, however, today he was not going to let anyone disturb Harry.

The incident with Blaise had opened a few old wounds for The Boy Who Lived and he had woken both of them up twice since with nightmares. Draco was still having dark dreams of his own thanks to Lucius' treatment, which meant over the last week sleep had been in short supply. If Harry had managed to put everything aside and fall asleep in the sun there was no way Draco was going to let anyone wake him up.

"So what's everyone doing for the Summer before we go out into the big wide world?" Seamus suddenly turned from watching the game of chess and asked the group loudly.

Harry shifted on Draco's lap, but did not wake completely and the blond youth glared at the Irish pupil.

"Sssh," he hissed quietly, aware that his plan of inaction was no longer viable, "you wake him and I'll hex you."

"Ah, is little Harry asleep?" Seamus said little aware of how close he was walking to a fine line.

Only one person had been stupid enough to ever test to see if Draco was serious when he issued his threats, and the Irish seventh year did not seem to have learned from his last experience. Boils and Jelly legs at the same time could not have been pleasant, but Seamus did not appear to remember. Draco narrowed his eyes at the Gryffindor and had begun to formulate a plan of attack when someone made it there first. There was a dull thud as Hermione's book hit the Irish youth on the shoulder.

"Stop being a prat," the young woman said in a low tone, "Harry needs all the sleep he can get."

From the glare Hermione sent Seamus, Draco was pretty sure that the walls of Gryffindor tower had not been quite thick enough before the two soul mates had begun to habitually put up silencing spells around their room at night.

"Sorry," Seamus said in a much softer voice, "the sun's getting to me."

Draco bit down the retort that came to his mind: the last thing he wanted right now was an argument. Harry had relaxed completely again and that was all that mattered.

"But anyway," Seamus continued in the same quiet tone, "is anyone doing anything nice when they go home?"

"My parents were talking about going to Crete," Lavender said in an equally hushed voice as she turned over and leant on one elbow, "but with everything that's been going on Dad might not be able to get away."

Draco let the conversation roll over him, not really listening to it as he relaxed with his lover. Harry's sleeping mind was calm and although Draco could not reach out and touch his soul mate's thoughts when he was not awake it was still comfortable to feel them flowing along gently. The young man put his head back, closed his eyes and let himself drift in a half doze barely aware of what was going on around him. He was brought back to the present by the sound of his name. Draco opened his eyes again and found Hermione looking at him questioningly.

"Sorry, I wasn't listening," he admitted quickly.

"We were just wondering what you and Harry will be doing after term ends," the young woman said quietly. "Is it back to the Dursley's?"

Draco opened his mouth to reply and then realised he didn't actually have an answer. The last two months had been so incredibly crazy that just making it to the end of term had seemed like a dream at times and they had not thought about what came after it.

"I don't know, I doubt the Dursleys would have us back, and the Manor wouldn't be safe," he replied eventually, "surviving to the end of the year seemed like such an unlikely idea that we forgot to plan for after that."

If it hadn't of been true it would have been funny.

"I expect Dumbledore will have it all worked out," Draco continued with a small shrug, "I have a feeling he has our lives planned out until the day we die. It's not as if either of us can exactly head straight into the workforce."

"You can always come and stay with us," Ron said generously, "Mum loves guests."

At one time the idea of spending more than a few seconds in a house full of Weasleys would have made Draco shudder, but now he smiled.

"I think I'd rather share Lucius' cell," he said just to keep up appearances, but the genuine smile had rather blown that comment out of the water.

Ron just grinned, obviously taking the non-verbal signals from Draco rather than the words that came out of his mouth.

"Gran hardly lets me out of the house," Neville complained quietly. "She thinks You Know Who is going to turn up and kidnap me at any moment."

The group went back to chatting and Draco went back to relaxing. He had not been joking when he told the others he thought Dumbledore would have his and Harry's Summer planned (and then some) and for once he could not be bothered

to try and out think the old man. The year was ending far better than he could ever have thought when he started it and that was as far as he was willing to think it through just then.

It was about ten minutes later that Draco felt a change in Harry. His soul mate's unconscious mind had gone from a nothingness flow to something that much more resembled waking thoughts: Draco knew that Harry was dreaming. At first he did not think anything of it; sleeping and dreaming were usual bed partners and he let his mind continue to drift, but gradually he began to realise that Harry was not just having any dream. Small shots of alarm and then fear began to permeate his soul mate's mind and Draco opened his eyes to look down at his lover. A little frown had developed on Harry's sleeping features and with a sigh Draco knew that his soul mate was entering a nightmare.

"Harry," he said gently and shook his lover by the shoulder.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hermione look over and he gave her a don't worry look. Harry was a light sleeper these days, it came with the territory of nightmares and he stirred as soon as Draco nudged him. The Hecatemus' green eyes opened and he blinked up at Draco still sleep dazed.

[You were dreaming,] he told Harry in explanation.

[Oh, thanks,] his lover replied moving slightly and glancing over at where the other Gryffindors were talking. [Did I miss anything?]

[Lavender might be going to Crete this Summer,] Draco replied irreverently, [but that was the most earth shattering news that was revealed whilst you were asleep.]

Without really considering what he was doing, Draco started running his fingers through Harry's hair again. His lover had silky hair even if it was thick and unruly and he enjoyed playing with it. In fact it seemed to be a shared habit: Harry always seemed to end up with his fingers in Draco's hair as well, not that the blond wizard was complaining; Harry had very dexterous fingers. In response to his ministrations his soul mate made a small sound of pleasure and closed his eyes again.

There was a flicker of movement from their group of friends and Draco looked up to see Seamus quickly looking away with a slightly pained expression on his face. The others were still talking and no one else seemed to have noticed. A small smile tugged at the corners of the Slytherin's mouth as mischief entered his head. With cheerful abandon Draco set about making sure Harry continued to express his enjoyment. The rest of the group did not appear to be paying attention, but every time Harry made a sound Seamus shifted slightly. The couple of times the Irish Gryffindor glanced in their direction Draco schooled his face to appear as if he was not remotely interested in anything but Harry.

[I know what you're doing, you know,] his soul mate's voice pointed out cheerfully in his head.

[You don't seem to mind,] was Draco's response.

[What can I say,] Harry said lightly, [I am a slave to your whims.]

Draco had to try very hard not to laugh out loud. The grin that appeared on his face seemed to be the last straw for Seamus.

"Would you two mind?" the Irish youth said a little desperately.

"Mind what?" Draco asked innocently, an expression that hadn't worked with anyone who knew him since he was eleven, but still came in very useful at times like this.

"Can you not keep your hands off each other for five minutes?" Seamus complained mournfully. "Or at least tell Harry to shut up."

The Slytherin affected a look of mild shock.

"I don't know what you mean," he said and felt Harry trying not to break into a fit of giggles.

"I'm begging you," Seamus said, obviously aware that he was being teased, "some of us don't have special dispensation and hence haven't been laid all term. The vocalisations are not helping."

The rest of the group were looking amused rather than sympathetic. Draco looked down at Harry who opened one eye and peered up at him.

"He thinks that was vocal," he said with an unrepentant grin. "That wasn't vocal," Draco continued, looking up at Seamus, "now vocal is why we put up the silencing charms for when ..."

"Do you have any shame at all?" Seamus sounded rather desperate and Harry finally broke out laughing.

Draco pretended to consider the question for a few moments and then said in a very reasonable tone, "No."

The Irish Gryffindor groaned and several of the other's laughed.

"Give up, Seamus," Harry warned good-naturedly, "he's a Slytherin; you will lose."

Draco ran his hand through his lover's dark hair again just to underline the point. Seamus threw up his hands in surrender and then much to Draco's surprise Harry sat up looking at his watch.

"Hell, I'm late," the young wizard said pointedly, "sorry guys, gotta go. Draco, I'll see you later."

And then with a peck on the cheek for his lover the great Harry Potter was gone in a flurry of robes.

"Where's he going in such a hurry?" Ron asked with genuine curiosity.

"I have no idea," Draco admitted openly, "and I promised not to ask."

That made him the centre of attention.

"It's the closest we can get to a secret," he said calmly, "I've no idea what he's up to, but I'm pretty sure I'm going to find out soon."

It had been going on since just after they had recovered from the kidnapping and Draco honestly did not know where Harry disappeared to every so often.

"And that doesn't bother you?" Neville sounded genuinely surprised.

"No," Draco replied honestly, he trusted Harry completely and the fact that his soul mate was going to the effort of trying to conceal something from his was actually quite alluring. "By the way, Longbottom, check mate in three moves," he pointed out, cutting off the subject firmly.

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In six hours there would be the leaving feast where Dumbledore would announce the winner of the house cup and then they would eat and it would all be over: their school career. When Draco had finally asked the headmaster if he had plans for him and Harry, Dumbledore had simply said that it was in hand and not to worry. Surprisingly he was trying to do just that; he was determined to enjoy this last celebration.

When Harry had entered the Gryffindor common room almost glowing with excitement Draco had been pretty sure that whatever his soul mate had been up to over the previous weeks was about to be revealed. Harry had dragged him upstairs to their room and was now standing in front of him looking animated and nervous at the same time. He appeared to be trying to figure out how to do something.

"Well we can stand here in silence until the feast begins," Draco said with a laugh as his lover failed to speak, "or you can tell me why you're wound like a spring."

"I've been researching something," Harry finally said, the excitement he was feeling spilling down their bond like as invigorating stream.

Draco raised an eyebrow at his soul mate: he had known that something like that was going on. Harry took the hint.

"I wanted to know if there was anything we could do to make sure it never happens again," the Hecatemus was not being particularly clear, but from the stab of remembered pain that went through Harry as he spoke, Draco knew what he was talking about. "I didn't know if it was possible, but I found it and they all helped me and it's done."

The last part was too much to work out for even Draco's sharp mind.

"Harry," he said with an amused frown, "you're making less sense than usual; how about from the beginning?"

For a moment Harry looked as if he would start talking again, but eventually he fished in his robes and brought out a small box. Harry felt like he was about to burst with anticipation as he handed the object to Draco.

"Open it," he said.

Draco could feel the magic around the box before he even opened it, but he did as he was told. His mouth let out a small 'Oh' at what he saw. Sat on dark green satin were two rings, each made out of what looked like silver and carved with intricate designs. One showed a dragon chasing its own tail around the ring and the other was a leaping lion; they were exquisite.

"They're charmed," Harry said quietly and moved so the two lovers were only inches apart, "a protection charm. They shield against Dissaepio Iugum: the magic is woven into the metal."

Draco didn't know what to say: he was completely overwhelmed by what his soul mate had done.

"You made these?" he said quietly, half stating and half questioning.

Draco didn't need to see Harry's nod to know the truth: these rings felt like his lover. Harry had poured himself into the metal and Draco could not express how that made him feel.

"The Professors helped," Harry felt as if he was overcome with a sudden need to explain, "Dumbledore found the metal for me and Snape purified it; McGonagall helped me with the Transfiguration spell, but yes I made them. Couldn't do the last bit with a wand; the spell was designed by a Hecatema so only we could do it. McGonagall's been letting me use her office in case I blew anything up."

Draco put out a finger and silenced Harry as his lover spoke nervously.

"They're beautiful," he said, showing Harry exactly how he felt and feeling the love he sent mirrored in his soul mate. "So are you going to put mine on for me then?"

For a moment Harry was still as he held Draco's gaze and then he picked up the lion from the box. Taking his left hand gently Harry slowly slipped the ring on Draco's third finger.

[I will love you forever,] Harry's voice said sincerely in his mind, [and I will never be parted from you again.]

Draco took the dragon ring from the case and held Harry's hand. The silver band slipped onto his soul mate's finger easily and then Draco looked into his lover's eyes.

[Forever,] he echoed Harry's words.

Draco felt the magic run through his body the moment the exchange was complete and it occurred to him that if felt incredibly like the first time he had touched Harry when they bonded.

"Harry," he said as his vision blurred suddenly, "did your research mention anything about after effects?"

"Um, I don't think so," Harry replied as Draco felt the disorientation mirrored in Harry and they made a grab for each other.

Draco's legs went first and he sank towards the floor followed quickly by Harry who was having similar trouble and could not support Draco's weight as well as his own. The magic was coursing through both of them and Draco knew it would do no good to resist it.

[If we miss the feast because you forgot to read the last paragraph,] he said as everything but Harry blurred out of his vision, [I will kill you.]

[I'll help,] his lover replied and then Harry's green eyes rolled up into his head.

Draco knew they were both collapsing onto the floor, but there was nothing he could do to stop it and the best he could manage was keeping a hold on Harry. He absently noted that the stone was cold and then his conscious brain shut down.

Chapter 40 A New Beginning

"Do you think they've been hexed?" the sound of voices and the feeling of people near by dragged Harry back from whatever corner of the universe his brain had decided to visit this time.

"I don't think it's normal to smile like that if you've been hexed," Harry recognised Hermione's voice, but he couldn't quite drag his eyes open yet.

"We should tell Professor McGonagall," Neville put in his thoughts on the matter, "they're out cold."

"Maybe you're right," Ron agreed.

That struck Harry as a very bad idea and as he heard the sound of movement towards the door he reacted rather than thought anything through. There was a slam from the direction of the door and a squeak from Neville.

"Who did that?" Longbottom asked rapidly.

"I did," Harry said, or at least that's what he tried to say as his brain realigned with his body: it came out rather garbled.

"Harry?" Hermione asked and as he opened his eyes he found his friend leaning over him.

"Hmm," he said knowing that anything more complicated was liable to come out as gibberish, or at the least in the wrong order.

"Are you okay?" Hermione continued her questioning.

Harry blinked up at her for a few moments while deciding on an answer. When his friend's face came into focus and stayed that way he nodded and pushed himself off the floor.

"Fine," he managed to say and was glad to find that the word was understandable.

"Have you two been sniffing something?" Ron asked dubiously. "You look stoned."

Draco was still lying on the floor, but Harry could tell that his soul mate was awake, he was just not moving yet. Ignoring Ron's enquiry he reached out to his lover's hand. Draco reluctantly opened his eyes and sat up as his limb was pulled. He looked somewhat nonplussed and Harry couldn't help worrying.

"We're not stoned, Weasley," Draco said evenly, "Harry just forgot to read the small print on a spell."

"There wasn't any small print," he defended himself, but ran out of steam quickly, "at least I don't think there was."

"You probably forgot to turn the page," his soul mate responded pointedly, but there was amusement coming from Draco's direction which waylaid most of the anxiety.

"What spell?" Hermione asked curiously.

Much to Harry's delight Draco stuck out his hand for the young woman to see, proudly showing her the ring.

"Oh my," Hermione said with just a touch of awe in her voice, "that is beautiful. Harry did you make this?"

He nodded, not sure what to say. Draco was brimming over with pleasure as he let the three standing Gryffindors see the ring, but Harry was not sure if he'd been forgiven for the unforeseen side effects yet.

"He has some talent behind those round glasses," Draco said in a neutral tone, "although he hides it well sometimes."

Harry had the sense to look sheepish and apologetic. Draco grabbed his hand and held it up next to his own so everyone could see.

"So this is what you've been hiding," it was Ron who made the observation. "What do they do?"

To a Muggle it would have been a strange question; to a wizard it made perfect sense: very few things in the wizarding world were only what they appeared to be.

"They're protection against the Dissaepius curse," Draco said with a mixture of pride and love in his voice. "Harry didn't realise the magic would have to align properly after we put them on. It was rather an overwhelming experience."

Now Harry knew he'd been forgiven.

"I had no idea there was a shield spell for Dissaepio Iugum," Hermione said with interest.

"It was designed by Martha Claypole a little over four hundred years ago," Harry provided helpfully. "She and her bond mate were hit with the curse during the Hereford Revolt of 1581 and she designed a counter measure when they recovered. It can only be done using raw magic and silver and they have to be combined without a wand."

As he finished he found that everyone in the room was looking at him.

"What?" he asked, not sure why everyone was staring at him.

"Who are you and where's the real Harry Potter?" Ron said with a grin.

[I think you were channelling Hermione,] Draco told him silently.

"I do know where the library is," Harry said, blushing. "Just because I refuse to read 'Hogwarts: A History' does not mean I only read Quidditch Weekly."

"Could have fooled me," Draco said sarcastically.

[Thank you for the support,] Harry replied in kind.

[You're welcome,] his lover said unrepentantly.

"I hate to break this up," Hermione said with a grin, "but we have half an hour before we have to be in the great hall and you two look like you're been wrestling with a dust bunny."

The thing about stone floors was that they didn't always show up the dirt that was on them. The house elves polished and cleaned once a week, but there had been a friendly Quidditch match earlier in the week that had ended in a Summer rainstorm and mud so the floor was not exactly spotless. Harry pulled himself to his feet using the edge of the bed and then offered Draco his hand.

"We'll be down in ten minutes," he promised faithfully.

"He'll be down in ten minutes," Draco corrected ruefully, "I'll be down in twenty."

Harry just grinned and did not disagree.

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As had become their habit over the year, the whole of the Gryffindor seventh year arrived at the Great Hall at the same time and took their places on their house table. Draco glanced over at the Slytherin table for what he supposed was the last time and wistfully wished he could actually sit there again once more before he left. It would have been nice to believe that since Blaise had been removed as a threat he could return to his house, but he knew in reality that although Zabini might have been the only active Death Eater, there were still others who looked on him as a traitor and would hex him at any opportunity. Harry squeezed his hand having picked up on what was going through his head and Draco gave him a quick smirk to show he was not really worried.

The hall was decorated in Gryffindor colours, somehow the house had held on to the house cup. In Draco's view this was probably because Harry had been so distracted all year he had not had time to end up in trouble and he said as much, which caused those around him to laugh. It was strange to think that at the beginning of the year he had come to school believing that his only future lay alone, along the path of the traitor, and yet now, here he sat, beside the young man who had once been his sworn enemy with friends he had once ridiculed. It was quite a humbling thought and he looked at the lion ring on his finger knowing he had been given a future he had never dreamed possible.

[Sometimes I can't believe it either,] Harry's voice sounded in his mind and Draco was not sure if he had voiced his thoughts accidentally, or his lover was just reading his body language.

It didn't matter and he smiled fondly at his soul mate.

[I could not wish for more,] Draco replied and felt the warmth of love envelope him.

They had been running slightly late and before Harry could continue the conversation, almost as soon as the seventh years were settled, Dumbledore climbed to his feet. It was the last speech of their last year and with one accord all the final year students at the Gryffindor table turned to look at their headmaster. Dumbledore spared each house a smile and Draco found himself smiling back for the first time in all his years at Hogwarts. It was a liberating experience.

"We are here again," the headmaster said slowly as the hall hushed, "the end of another year, and a better year than I had hoped. We have had our share of drama," Dumbledore paused, "and romance," he continued with a twinkle in his eye.

"Don't we know it," it was Seamus' voice.

That caused a ripple of laughter to flow round the hall and Harry turned a lovely shade of pink. Draco was not prone to embarrassment and he grinned broadly at the reference, sharing a look with Dumbledore and partaking of the old man's delight.

"Firstly I would like to extend my congratulations to Gryffindor who have retained the house cup this year," the headmaster continued in his usual manner. "It was a close run competition this year and they only beat Slytherin by twelve points."

A cheer went up from the Gryffindor table and took a good few minutes to settle. Draco did not shout his approval with those he was sitting with, but he did give the other seventh years a genuine smile. He was still a Slytherin and cheering for those he sat with would have been inappropriate, but Draco could appreciate their delight, especially since Harry shared in it.

"And secondly," Dumbledore continued when the noise finally stopped, "I would like to end this year with a message of hope. There is a growing darkness in our world," he said gravely, "and it has touched this school twice this year: once with the kidnapping of Mr Malfoy and once with the suspension and subsequent hospitalisation of Mr Zabini."

The headmaster let his words sink in as his old eyes moved around the room.

"However, Hogwarts has also been blessed with a union that has crossed established boundaries," Dumbledore told the school in a warm tone. "A rare bond has been seen amongst us, which had bound two souls together who were once the most bitter enemies. Let this be a lesson to us all that no certainties are ever written in stone and that light may banish darkness wherever it may find it."

Draco felt himself hanging off the headmaster's words, but he spared a glance at the Slytherin table for old times' sake. What he saw gave him hope that his house was not completely lost. There was derision and boredom on many faces, but just a few seemed to have forgotten their masks and had their eyes fixed on Dumbledore.

"Voldemort continues his campaign of subterfuge and dark magic," the headmaster told then all evenly, "and he seeks to make us fear him, but never forget that darkness is only the absence of light and while Hogwarts stands there will always be that. United we will remain and together we shall weather the coming storm."

Total silence greeted Professor Dumbledore's affirmation, but every face that was turned to him seemed to agree. Draco could almost feel the energy in the room and he suddenly knew that the old man's words were not rhetoric, as he had been taught by Lucius; Dumbledore spoke the truth and while Hogwarts existed the darkness could have no victory. At that moment Draco realised what a gift this place of safety was to their world.

"That is all I wished to say," Dumbledore said suddenly with a smile, breaking the mood with cheerful warmth, "and I only have one more notice. When you return

to your houses tonight would all fifth, sixth and seventh years please check the lists posted over the fireplaces. If your name is on the list report to your head of house in their office before you retire to bed. That is all, now let us eat."

The tables were instantly groaning will food and a cheer went round the room. Draco was curious as to Dumbledore's last message as he could tell was Harry, but the food smelt wonderful and there was no way either of them was going to let curiosity get in the way of celebrating their final year end. With a grin to his soul mate, Draco reached out and joined the feast.

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"Do you four know why we're here?" Seamus asked Ron, Hermione, Harry and Draco as they waited with the others who had found their names on the list mentioned by the headmaster at the feast.

It had not really been a surprise when Harry and Draco found their names together with those of many of their year mates, and since the Slytherin had been on the Gryffindor list he had stayed with Harry rather than going to Snape's office. Harry shook his head, but he didn't blame the Irish seventh year for asking, after all he and his friends were usually ahead of the game. This time, however, they were as much in the dark as everyone else. Professor McGonagall was seated behind her desk waiting for the last few to pile through the door and as it finally closed she stood up.

"Thank you for coming," she said in her normal calm tones, "I have no doubt you are all wondering why you have been called here."

A murmur of agreement went round the room. It had not escaped Harry that those in the room were all pupils who excelled in one way or another or who were members of the DA. Neville was there and he was undoubtedly the best herbologist in the school; the entire house Quidditch team who were fifth year and above were there; Seamus and Jocelyn Clark a fifth year had both gained recognition for their Charms work over the year; Dean and Pavarti, and then of course there was the usual Voldemort fighting crew of Harry, Draco, Ron and Hermione.

"Hogwarts will not be closing down as usual this Summer," the Professor said evenly. "In light of recent Dark activity it has been decided in conjunction with the Ministry to offer advanced classes in many subjects not covered by the normal curriculum. These classes are only being offered to a select number of pupils: you are among that number."

She paused and looked around the group making eye contact with every individual.

"Where necessary every one of your parents has already been consulted and they have given their permission for you to stay on should you so wish," McGonagall continued seriously. "Now of course no one is forcing any one of you to remain here: the classes are purely optional and you may go home if you would prefer. The subjects you will be studying if you choose to remain will be in advance of what most of you have looked at before. If you feel you are not up to the challenge join your classmates on the train home and none the worse will be thought of you."

There was total silence among the pupils. It was news that Harry had not even considered and it shocked him as much as it shocked his fellow Gryffindors.

Firstly he was so used to the Ministry being the enemy with their heads in the sand that there cooperation in such an enterprise was startling, and that Dumbledore would consider using his school to teach what Harry suspected would be war craft showed just how far the Voldemort situation had progressed.

"We are facing open war and this decision has not been made lightly," Professor McGonagall said evenly. "We believe that before next year is out Voldemort will show his hand openly. None as young as you are should have to face this and if it were in our power we would not ask you to, but our world is out of time and we have no choice. We wish you to be prepared and this is our only way of doing it. If you wish to stay, report to the great hall tomorrow morning when the others leave for the train. That is all."

The Gryffindors looked at each other and all faces were openly showing shock and surprise. There had been several theories thrown around at dinner, but none had been close to the truth. Almost too stunned to speak to each other, the group wordlessly turned to the door, unable to voice the decision they were facing.

"Mr Potter, Mr Malfoy," his house head's words broke in to Harry's thoughts as he moved to follow his companions, "please stay a moment."

The young man moved to obey without thinking and pulled Draco to the side as the others filed past them. Professor McGonagall's news had been so thought provoking that Harry didn't even both to wonder why she might want to see him and his soul mate.

"The headmaster would like to see you both in his office as soon as you leave here," the professor said calmly after the last of the other Gryffindors had left the room. "I believe he wishes to talk to you both about your future."

Harry found himself nodding before he caught up with what he was doing, after the previous revelations this did not surprise him in the slightest. Both he and Draco had been expecting the summons for days now.

"Thank you, Professor," he said evenly, "is that all?"

His head of house nodded and with a look at Draco he knew they were agreed and as one they turned to leave.

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Fending off their friends had taken a few minutes, but once the other Gryffindors had realised the soul mates had been called to the headmaster's office they did not keep them long. Hence in less than a quarter of an hour, the two young men found themselves sitting once more in front of Professor Dumbledore's desk with tea cups in their hands. By this time, the news of the Summer opening of Hogwarts had sunk in and Harry was intensely curious as to what the headmaster would have to say about it, as was Draco. The expression in Dumbledore's eyes as he looked into Harry's gaze was serious, but there was also a confidence there which gave the young man a strangely calm feeling. Talk of war and training had been unsettling, but Harry found the look in the headmaster's face went a long way to brushing that aside.

"I have a confession to make, Harry," Dumbledore said eventually in a calm, deliberate manner. "I believe that the coming conflict will centre on wherever you are. Once it may have been the Ministry or another target, but over the last two

years it has become plainly obvious that you are Voldemort's focus. This fact alone gives us an advantage."

Harry did not know what to think; his instinct was to demand that he be sent as far away from anyone who could be harmed as possible, but the headmaster's last sentence stopped him. Draco's hand was clamped firmly over the Hecatemus' fingers and when Harry glanced at his soul mate the Slytherin's mouth was set in a firm line.

"With your cooperation, Harry," Dumbledore told him evenly, "this means we may prepare the battle ground."

"We both know it's him or me," Harry replied in a tone that matched the headmaster's. "I will do whatever is necessary."

"We both will," Draco added firmly.

The headmaster smiled at them in a rather sad way as if he had been expecting the answer, but regretted having to ask the question.

"The most defensible place in the British Isles is Hogwarts," Dumbledore continued calmly.

"But the children," Harry said as what the headmaster was saying became clear.

"Will be taken care of, Harry," Dumbledore assured him calmly. "Voldemort will not set foot inside these walls, that I promise you. The battle, whatever form it takes, will not touch the innocents here, but the conflict must end on these grounds."

"The Summer lessons," Draco spoke without emotion in his voice, "they're part of the whole plan aren't they."

Dumbledore nodded firmly.

"A castle, no matter how impregnable must have an army to guard it," the headmaster said openly. "Those lower years who partake of the training will be in charge of their fellows should a battle come to Hogwarts."

"And the seventh years?" Harry prompted although he suspected something of the answer.

"As of next year there will be fifteen new appointments to the staff of Hogwarts," Dumbledore revealed with a slight smile. "Each will be as an assistant to an existing post, thus allowing the current members of staff time to assist in the defence of the school and giving Hogwarts a further level of security. These places will be offered to those seventh years who show the most aptitude for the positions."

The old man was holding something back of that much Harry was sure, but he did not know what until the headmaster produced two sheets of parchment from his desk draw. He placed one in front of Draco and one in front of Harry and waited for their reaction. The Gryffindor could not help himself; he began to read.

Contact of Employment
Job title: Assistant Flying Coach and Head of Extra Curricular Defence Against the Dark Arts Training

Harry didn't make it any further as he looked up at Dumbledore rather dumbfounded, then he glanced over at Draco's parchment. Under job title it said "Assistant Potions Professor".

"I need nothing more than what I have seen of both of you over your time here to know that is would please me a great deal to welcome you both to the staff," the headmaster said in such a genuine tone that it brought a lump to Harry's throat. "You have both shown resourcefulness and courage under conditions which could have destroyed the strongest wizard and your strength is something Hogwarts cannot afford to lose. The other thirteen positions will be offered at the end of the Summer to the strongest and most resourceful of your fellow school leavers, but it gives me great pleasure to offer you both places now."

It all left Harry rather speechless, but one question did make it to the front of his mind.

"What does it mean by 'Head of Extra Curricular DADA Training'?" he asked before his thoughts could become too bogged down by other things.

"It means the DA," Draco said evenly as he looked at Dumbledore steadily, "doesn't it Headmaster."

The old man nodded his head with a smile.

"Your efforts to arm your fellow classmates have been admirable, Harry," Dumbledore told him evenly, "and we would like you to continue openly. The DA will become the After School DADA society and it was unanimously agreed that if you are willing, you should continue to run it."

Now Harry really didn't know what to say and he looked at Draco rather lost. The hardness was gone from his soul mate's features and he seemed a little overwhelmed as well. This was more than either of them had been expecting. Harry had thought at worst he would be shipped off to somewhere deemed safe and at best hidden away somewhere in Hogwarts, this was so much better.

"You need not decide tonight," the headmaster said kindly, obviously sensing that neither of the soul mates could really process the information, "and please feel free to study the contracts thoroughly."

[They want us to stay,] Harry said, still not quite able to believe what had been said.

[Do you think I could be as terrifying as Snape?] Draco replied with a catch in his mental voice.

Harry let out a little laugh, this was incredible.

"Do you have a quill I could borrow?" Harry asked as he turned back to the headmaster and the old man smiled warmly.

Even as Harry signed his name at the bottom of the parchment and then watched Draco do the same he still couldn't quite believe it. Only an hour before he had thought his final night at Hogwarts was coming to a close and that he would be leaving the only place he truly called home, but now he was becoming part of it as he had never been before. Live or die, win or lose he was home and as he looked into Draco's eyes when the Slytherin finished adding his name to his

contract, Harry knew that, together, they were beginning a whole new chapter of their lives.

The End