

If You've A Ready Mind

Chapter One

It all happened because Draco was a little distracted that day. Things had not been going well. Father had been very cutting about Draco's plan to smuggle a racing broom into Hogwarts, Crabbe had sat on his lunch on the train and Harry Potter had turned out to be a rude, insufferable gitface. It was not how Draco had pictured his first day.

It also happened because Draco had a tendency to babble when he was nervous.

So he sat in complete blackness, a stupid threadbare hat covering his eyes and its stupid voice ringing in his ears, and started to talk.

"Malfoy - that'll be Slytherin, then..."

"Yes, please," Draco said. "Or Ravenclaw, you know, that wouldn't be bad either. Not Hufflepuff though, because otherwise I shall instantly transfer to Durmstrang."

"Ravenclaw." The Hat paused. "Interesting. Haven't heard a Malfoy ask for another house for decades."

"Er," Draco said. "Actually, on second thoughts, scratch that, Slytherin, please. Just Slytherin, no also-rans, no second guessing. Slytherin!"

"Perhaps it's time for a little diversity. RAVENCLAW!"

"I changed my mind," Draco hissed, and then felt hands tugging at the hat brim. "Just a minute!" he said indignantly to the old woman in green. "I need to get something cleared up, this incompetent piece of haberdashery has entirely misunderstood me-"

"Mr Malfoy, it is time to join your new house!"

Draco blinked in the light, glared and held onto the hat. All the people at a table decked in blue were clapping, this could not be happening. He glared at them and the clapping faltered, at which point Professor McGorgon glared at him.

"Mr Malfoy!"

Draco got off the stool with extreme reluctance. "My father will hear about this," he informed her, and stomped to the stupid table in stupid blue.

"Hi," said a boy in the seat next to him, blinking behind glasses that reminded him of The Boy Who Was A Real Letdown, Actually. "I'm Terry Boot, I-"

Draco glowered at him. "Don't talk to me, this is all a horrible mistake. You wait till my father hears about this. You just wait."

"Um," said Terry Boot. "Okay. Do you want the pumpkin juice?"

"I told you not to talk to me!"

Draco saw the rest of the Sorting through narrowed eyes. The Sorting Hat took an awfully long time with Harry Potter - probably it was getting his autograph or something - and Draco vowed that if that prat got into Slytherin instead of Draco somehow Draco would find a way to end him.

The Hat eventually said "GRYFFINDOR!" Potter never knew what a lucky escape he'd had.

"Don't look so unhappy, little boy," a curly-haired girl with a Prefect badge whispered. "We'll take care of you here."

"I don't belong here," Draco sneered. "So you're not the prefect of me. And I am only slightly below average height for an eleven year old!"

"Isn't he a cheery little ray of sunshine," the girl, whose name turned out to be Penelope, murmured to her friends.

"I can hear you," Draco announced loudly. He considered staying put in the Great Hall until they were forced to make up a bed for him in Slytherin, but it was draughty in the hall and probably the house elves would come and clear him away and put him in a rubbish bin. It had been that kind of day.

So he stamped up to the stupid Tower on the west bit of the castle, away from everything. It was draughty there too, and they were put in a room that was all blue and Draco felt as if that

stupid Squid had dragged him underwater and was holding him hostage in a place where he couldn't breathe.

"Are you homesick?" asked a boy with an eerie amulet around his neck. "I'm Anthony Goldstein, the moving staircases made me feel wretched. I think I'll ask my mum to write me a note excusing me from using them."

"Of course I'm not homesick, you imbecile!" Draco snapped. "Don't think you can talk to me just because you have a demon around your throat."

Anthony Goldstein gave him a wary look. After a moment, he ventured: "D'you mean my inhaler?"

Draco was sick and tired of these fools. Crabbe and Goyle would never have kept bothering him like this, he was all alone in an icy blue tower and what his father would say when he heard of this didn't bear thinking...

He sat at the window with his arms locked around his knees, trying to tell the world how very displeased he was through the medium of icy, disdainful silence.

Clearly his icy disdain needed work, because that specy twit Terry Boot came and sat on the window ledge beside him, comfortably propping an arm against Draco's drawn-up knees. Draco was in the middle of swallowing his rage and made a funny noise that the idiot utterly misinterpreted.

"You can cry if you want," he whispered. "D'you miss your mum?"

Draco drew himself up. "Obviously, being practically twelve, I do not miss my mother, and even if I did I certainly would not weep like a woman about it. I am not upset. I am outraged! I have been placed in this house against my will and I feel that a case could be made for that hat kidnapping me. I shall inform my father, and he will sue."

Terry blinked, which people often did when Draco launched into one of his tirades against injustice. Draco felt that the blinks signalled agreement, and regarded Terry with slightly less hauteur.

"You wanted to be in Slytherin?" Terry ventured. "Well, I mean - I don't think Ravenclaw is so different."

Draco wanted to demand how it was the same, when none of his friends were with him and he was stuck up in a tower and his father was going to be disappointed in him again, but Lucius would've called that snivelling, so he glared ferociously at Terry and hoped he would proceed.

Terry gazed at him earnestly, eyes wide behind his glasses. "Well, Slytherins are the ambitious ones, aren't they? They like power. And knowledge is power, so..."

Knowledge is power. The words rattled around Draco's head for a minute and then seemed to find somewhere to fit. His father would like that, he thought. Knowledge is power.

Besides, even if Terry did have stupid glasses and stupid hair like stupid Potter, he was clearly trying to be friends, and that helped. Draco felt a slight easing of that tense fear - born when he couldn't even make friends with some boy in a robe shop and multiplied by about a thousand when said boy turned out to be Harry stupid Potter - that nobody but his old companions would want to be friends at all in this strange, enormous place.

"I suppose there is some merit in what you say," he acknowledged grudgingly.

"D'you always talk like that?" asked Anthony Amulet Boy Goldstein. "Like a lawyer? I suppose it's because all you purebloods are homeschooled."

Good God, they let the Muggleborn into this benighted house! Draco tried to remain calm: he had no idea whether he was outnumbered or not, after all. He cast an intensely suspicious eye over Michael Corner and Kevin Entwistle, who were lurking on their own beds and looking, to Draco's mind, rather shifty.

"I liked home school," Terry said wistfully, confirming Draco's favourable Terry Boot impression. "I miss my mum and my sisters, a bit." He brightened slightly. "But I hear there's a wicked library here."

"Thrill me, why don't you," Draco drawled, and was a little bit pleased when Terry laughed.

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Draco got his first real taste of Ravenclaw life when everyone adjourned to the library

immediately after classes. He might've preferred to go exploring around the castle, but he thought Knowledge is power, and that his father might still be proud as long as Draco did well, and besides everyone was doing it and it wasn't like Draco was going to be the only one left out.

Once in the library, he strolled casually about peeking at other people's homework.

"Do you mind?" hissed Michael Corner indignantly.

"Not at all," Draco replied, and decided that Corner was on his black list. He'd deal with him later, though - right now he was on a Ravenclaw mission.

He studied everyone's homework with care - after initial protests he found everyone just submitted - and found a clear winner. To his surprise, she was a Gryffindor. She was also sitting quite alone, and Draco thought it was probably typical of Gryffindor to shun intelligence as if it was infectious.

He beamed winningly at her, a tactic that always worked with Mother's friends. "Hello," he said. "I'm Draco Malfoy. D'you want to be study partners?"

The girl also had hair like a nest of mad squirrels and unattractive teeth, especially when she was gaping like that.

"Yes!" she exclaimed after a moment, and began to assiduously clear the space next to her.

"That would be lovely! Please sit down!"

This rabid anxiety for his company gratified Draco. Clearly she was a woman of superior taste. Or lonely, of course, but whatever it was, it meant she wouldn't realise Draco was only interested in one thing.

Her flow charts.

"I'm Hermione Granger," she whispered, beaming back at him. "It's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you-" and your flow charts. "Working on Charms?"

He discovered that she had an encyclopaedic knowledge of all their text books already, and he congratulated himself on picking the best study partner with his usual brilliance. He was also happy to note that she didn't know a few perfectly elementary things, and was grateful for help. He foresaw a beautiful symbiotic relationship, and having the most perfect flow charts in the land.

He went to dinner with Granger at his elbow, happily pouring information into his ear, and dropped her to her table like a gentleman.

Harry Potter and his pet Weasley glowered scruffily in their direction.

"Told you she was a nightmare," Weasley mumbled.

"Can't believe he's not in Slytherin," Potter said.

Just as Draco had thought. They were rude even to members of their own house, the barbarians. Poor little Granger, stuck with them all day. Rendered charitable by flow chart love, he gave her another smile before he left.

Ravenclaw was not turning out as badly as Draco had feared. Terry continued his winning streak as Draco's favourite dorm mate, and he decided Anthony was quite harmless after Anthony laughed so hard at one of Draco's impressions that he upset gravy over the whole table and got five house points taken from them. The worst of it was that they all refused to be called by their last names, though Draco explained at length that it was more decorous.

Michael Corner was a useless prettyboy and Kevin Entwistle never talked at all, which meant Draco's dark suspicions of him evolved daily, but on the whole things were all right. Teachers combined to shower him and Granger with praise, except for that imbecile Madam Hooch who didn't know good flying when she saw it. Draco would have torn a strip off the incompetent if everyone hadn't been distracted by Anthony's mum sending a letter excusing Anthony from Quidditch on account of his vertigo.

"It's okay, Draco," Terry said soothingly as Draco fumed. "It's not like most people in Ravenclaw even take Quidditch all that seriously. The other houses are insane about it: they let it affect their marks."

"We don't play Quidditch?" Draco demanded.

"Oh, you can if you like, but it'd probably be better to concentrate on your studies."

"I think Terry's absolutely right," Granger announced, slipping into the desk beside Draco's.

"Flying is ridiculous and requires no real cleverness. After all, Harry Potter was the best at it and he'd never done it before, he never even tries at anything."

Draco sneered. "I bet he doesn't. I bet he's really stupid. Isn't he stupid, Granger?"

"Don't call me Granger, Draco."

"Pah, Quidditch," scoffed Draco, suppressing a pang. "He can keep it." He paused. "Weasley wasn't any good at it, was he? Hermione! Tell me Weasley wasn't any good."

"I'm sure I didn't notice," Hermione sniffed. "Ron Weasley is the most unpleasant boy I've ever met and I do not look at him more than I can help. You know, he's from an old pureblood family. I think he must be one of those wizards who are prejudiced against the Muggleborn."

"Are you Muggleborn?" Draco felt like he might faint. He sat beside her in the library every day! He'd actually touched her plenty of times, the whole school knew they were friends, his father was going to have a fit!

"Yes, my parents are dentists," Hermione said, as if Draco could have any idea what unearthly Muggle thing a dentist was. She looked over at him, her face screwed up with sudden anxiety. "Does that - does that bother you?"

Draco looked at her stupid hair and thought about how long she'd spent with his flow chart, helping him make it perfect and not complaining when he'd bossed her around. And he hadn't thanked her. Her stupid face was making him feel funny.

"Ahahahaha," he said unconvincingly. "Why would you think that?"

He composed a letter to his father in his head, saying he was using a Muggleborn to get ahead in class. Surely Father would appreciate that.

Hermione looked uncertain but happier, and at that point all conversation had to cease because Professor McGonagall came in. Naturally, Potter and Weasley kept talking and got house points taken off.

Draco smirked.

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Some days were considerably worse than others. The day Draco got his first Owl from his father, remarking that Draco would go for the soft option of Ravenclaw and discussing a move to Durmstrang next year already, was also the day they found out that Hogwarts was crawling with trolls.

"It's only one troll, Draco," Terry consoled him.

"This is a place of education, Terry! There shouldn't be any rampaging trolls, we don't have

any classes in being agonisingly smushed to death!"

Draco's vehement gesture connected with Padma Patil's butterfly clasp and she gave him a cold look.

"Oh get over it, you look like a ninny anyway," Draco snapped.

"I am so sorry," Terry told her. "He gets all agitated, let me help you with-"

"I am not agitated! I am - no, wait, I am agitated, it's a perfectly reasonable response to having trolls frolicking about our school. Maybe it'll have babies. Maybe we'll stay up here in the tower until we die, hearing the hopeless cries of the Hufflepuffs as the trolls crunch their bones..."

Draco noted with macabre satisfaction that most of his house had started paying attention to his dramatic rendition of their future woes. They might perish, but at least he would perish given the adulation that was clearly his due.

Once the troll was contained, another nasty surprise was on the way, because apparently Granger (who was his) had bonded with Weasley and Perfect Potter. The next time he saw her, she was chatting away to them as if they'd been civil to her the whole time.

Oh Draco, put not your faith in Mudbloods!

He gave her a betrayed look and stomped off, only marginally appeased when she

immediately hurried after him.

"Draco, wait-"

"Traitor!" Draco flung over his shoulder. "Fickle, wayward woman! Potter, of all people!"

"He's really quite nice," Granger said, adding blasphemy to her list of crimes. "Sort of sweet."

"I don't have to stand here and listen to this filthy talk, you know."

Granger poured a frenzied tale into his ears, becoming overexcited as Draco supposed women were wont to do. Eventually she wound down and stood facing him, frizzed hair aquiver.

Draco gave her a long look. "So those lackwits locked you in a room with a troll. For which they should be expelled. And then someone stuck their wand up the troll's nose - what finesse you Gryffindors have, what grace under pressure - and then you lied to a teacher, Granger, for shame! For those two!"

Her eyes softened. "Ron was really brave."

"Who is - oh my God, Weasley? I feel extremely unwell."

"They explained to me, they just thought I was bossy-"

"Oh, why shouldn't you be bossy?" Draco demanded. "You know better than they do."

"Draco," Hermione said. "Please. This is a big deal for me, having friends in my house." She gave him an imploring look. "Be happy for me. We're still study partners, right? I wouldn't want anyone else."

Draco's eyes dropped from hers to the floor. "Don't try to get around me," he muttered. "With all your girl wiles. I'm not happy. I am horrified at your taste, I am shocked and appalled. That Potter's so arrogant and spoiled, strutting about the school, he thinks he can just pick you up and drop you at any time-"

"Harry's not going to drop me!"

"Little Hermione," Draco said, shaking his head sorrowfully. "So sweet. So naive. You can't trust people like that, you know."

"He thinks you're arrogant as well," Hermione told him.

"You see! You see how he prances about the school, passing judgement on all its hapless students, thinking he's cock of the walk..."

Hermione shook her head. "You're hopeless."

"You misspoke," Draco informed her kindly. "He's hopeless. You'll see that, in time. You're a clever girl, Hermione, and I have every faith that he will not hoodwink you for long."

Potter (damn his devilish wiles, Draco could see right through him) managed to keep her hoodwinked, just the same. She palled around with him and Weasley all the time, it was like a triumvirate of bad hair with Potter as its king. It was typical of Potter to go around coolly nicking other people's friends, he had no shame.

She was still his study partner, though, if only because Potter was too thick to find his way to the library. And Draco had other friends.

Plenty of friends. He'd been leaving the library when he bumped into Crabbe, Goyle and Blaise Zabini. He'd known that Crabbe and Goyle liked having someone to follow, but really, Blaise Zabini? Draco's mother said the way Mrs Zabini carried on was a scandal.

"Nose in a book like a good little Ravenclaw?" Zabini inquired.

"If I had a mother like yours," Draco remarked sweetly, "I wouldn't talk about where anyone put any of their body parts. Those in glass houses, you know..."

Both mean and pleasingly grown-up-sounding. Draco was proud.

"You two! Get him!" Zabini snapped.

Crabbe, Goyle and Draco all looked at him as if he was insane.

"You must be joking," Crabbe said at last. "Malfoy's been our friend for years."

"Besides," Goyle added with a glare, "I am very anti-violence. There is no excuse but self-defence - or the defence of your friends - for hurting another human being."

"So there," Draco put in.

"Expecting other people to do outrageous things like that!" Goyle said sternly. "You cannot be happy in yourself. You should have a long hard think about your personal issues. Malfoy may say a lot of stupid things-"

"I am standing right here!"

"-but he'd never ask us to do anything like that. Because he's smart," Goyle added, giving Draco a proud look. "That's why they put him in the smart house."

Draco mostly resisted the urge to preen.

"You two are hopeless dolts," Zabini said. He strolled off, apparently able to maintain his calm without effort, which Draco rather admired.

Draco was left looking at Crabbe and Goyle, who looked a little hopeful. There had been so much to do in Ravenclaw, so much to get used to, he hadn't had much time, and Draco hadn't been sure if Crabbe and Goyle would want to be on terribly friendly terms with someone who hadn't even managed to get into Slytherin.

"He's wrong," Draco announced. "You're only mostly hopeless dolts. Behind on your

homework already?" He waited for the guilty nods and grinned. "C'mon, let's go back into the library. I know a girl you two should meet."

As they were going back in some twerp called Longbottom knocked into him and Draco considered casting the Leg-Locker curse, but then he'd mastered it weeks ago and was a bit bored with it now. Besides, Terry and Hermione would give him hell.

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"Psst!" said Potter.

Typical, thought Draco. Potter the star, always assuming he could get someone's attention even if everyone was clearly trying to concentrate on Professor Snape's homework. Like he'd even be in the library if it wasn't for Hermione. Like anyone wanted him in the library. He just thought he owned the place, didn't he? Draco's hate was as deep as the ocean.

"Psst! Malfoy!"

"Psst, some of us actually do our homework!" Draco hissed. "I'm not helping you with it!"

Potter's homely scarred face twisted. "Shut up, Malfoy. I can't believe Hermione's friends with you. I bet you're just using her for her brains."

"Potter, I'll have you know that I, unlike you, have some brains of my own."

Potter sighed as if Draco was the one bothering him, which Draco certainly was not. Draco had rules: he didn't bother anyone but Hermione in the library. Potter was fair game at mealtimes and during classes.

"Fine," he said. "I told her what would happen if I tried to talk to you."

"Why did she tell you to talk to me? What! Is this a conspiracy?"

"She said you were OK underneath it all-"

"Underneath what all?" Draco asked dangerously.

"And I thought at least you weren't in Slytherin, so-"

Draco's eyes narrowed until Potter was the only thing in a dark, slitted world. "Because being in Slytherin is so terrible," he spat. "Because being in Slytherin means you're such a mean, horrible person."

Potter blinked and Draco took it as agreement. He balled up a perfectly good piece of parchment covered with valuable notes, and threw it hard at Potter's scar.

"OW!"

"As far as you're concerned, Potter, I will always be mean." He balled up another piece and threw it hard, but Potter was quicker than he expected and caught it, an inch from his face.

"And horrible!"

Hateful staring was interrupted by Madam Pince bearing down on them with librarianly wrath. She threw them out of the library and informed Draco that she was surprised and ashamed.

"Look what you did!" Draco erupted as the library door shut. "A whole evening of study ruined by the Boy Who Wouldn't Shut Up!"

"You're mad," Potter said flatly. "You threw things at me, you arrogant sod, how could you-"

"What's going on here?" asked Professor Snape, and Draco spun around to face him.

He could not believe Professor Snape was here, and would know that Draco had been thrown out of the library. Professor Snape was the best teacher in school, and Potions was the coolest subject ever, and Draco's mother said she'd mentioned Draco to Professor Snape personally. Was there no end to the torments Potter introduced to his life?

"Sir, I was doing my homework in the library and Potter got us thrown out because he wouldn't stop pestering me. He called me names."

"You little rat, I'm going to-"

Draco fixed Professor Snape with a limpid gaze. "Also," he added earnestly, "he threatened me."

"Well, well, well. That is serious," Professor Snape remarked. Draco smiled wanly and appealingly up at him.

"That's total rubbish," Potter began in furious tones.

"Is it?" Professor Snape asked silkily. "As far as I'm aware, no Ravenclaw has ever been thrown out of the library before, whereas Gryffindors have a long and disturbing history of bullying students from other houses."

Draco gave a vigorous nod. "I felt victimised, Professor. Honestly I did."

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Professor Snape said.

He was a Solomon come to judgement, yea, a Solomon!

Potter, such a dark red you couldn't even see his disfiguring scar, opened his mouth.

"Rising another point with every syllable you utter in my presence, Potter."

Snape raised an eyebrow and Potter made a noise like a dying fish. After a moment, Snape continued his progress down the hall.

"He is so cool," Draco breathed. "I wish he was my head of house."

"I hate you so much," Potter told him devoutly.

"Oh snap," said Draco.

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As if studying all the hours God sent and trying to cope with living in the same castle as Potter and not exploding of hate was not enough, Draco made the discovery that those two-bit hooligans had lured Hermione into a life of crime.

"Don't try to deny it, woman," he said. "Terry, talk some sense into her. There was a dragon in that oafish servant's vile little cottage, which looks combustible by the way, and is right beside the Forbidden Forest. There's clearly going to be a forest fire. How jolly, perhaps we'll all be killed!"

"I can't believe you saw," Hermione murmured unhappily. "Harry said he saw you looking in the window, but-"

"He certainly did not see me! I was sneaking about. Sneakily."

Hermione looked anxious. "Please don't tell anyone, Draco. Hagrid really loves his dragon, we're going to get it out of the country-"

"Aha! Potter's a smuggler, I knew it! That's piracy, that is! Dragon piracy!"

Hermione and Terry stared at him as if he had gone crazy. "Don't worry, Hermione," Terry said. "You know how he gets. Once he's calmer, I'll talk him around."

Draco gave a cry of righteous outrage.

"You sound like an enraged teakettle," Terry told him. Draco should've known better than to get chummy with a speccy boy, they were all tarred with the same evil brush.

"Draco, if you tell you'll get me into a lot of trouble," Hermione said. Women were also a delusion and a snare. "D'you want to get me in trouble?"

"I wouldn't mention your part in it at all," Draco offered. "A little detention would be good for them, Hermione. Break their spirits. Then they could be your slaves."

"They would be expelled!"

"Then they can go live with Oafy," Draco soothed her. "And be your little squib slaves."

"His name is Hagrid!" Hermione exclaimed, and ran off looking upset. Draco was sure eleven was too young to be having her time of the month already.

"I'm good to her, Terry. I offer her slaves. What more could a woman want?"

Terry coughed. "Maybe you could try to get on a little better with her other friends."

"Get on with Potter?" Draco exclaimed. "Never!"

He was just evolving a cunning scheme which would mean he could catch Potter and Weasley in the act and have them disgraced and turned away like so many house elves who deserved clothes, when Hermione sent him an Owl telling him when and where they were planning to commit their heinous crime, and added that she trusted him.

He was on his way to tell a teacher when Terry wrested the Owl from him and read it.

"Draco! You don't want to get Hermione expelled, do you?"

Draco took a deep breath. "No, no. Of course not, you're right, I'm weak, it's just that I want my revenge against Potter-"

"What'd he do?"

"It's more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean," Draco said, not wanting to get into being humiliated on trains. "Look, Terry, you have to help me. Don't let me leave this room tonight. No matter what I say. No matter how much money I offer you. Get Goldstein to help."

"Don't call me Goldstein," Anthony said. "What's going on?"

"I must be kept away from the outside world," Draco informed him. "Invoke the power of your amulet to bar the doors!"

"It's an inhaler, Draco, for the last time."

Draco didn't know why Anthony insisted on using fancy words for his demon of the air, but he had more important things on his mind. He clung to the arms of the chair and stared at the arms on their clock. Sweat was dripping down his face; he could taste Potter's expulsion.

"I can't help it, I have to tell!" he exploded at last. "I'll bribe Hermione's way into Beauxbatons or something, Terry, Terry, let me go, it's for the best, it's a sacrifice for the greater good, Hermione will understand-"

"Can't let you," Terry said between his teeth, pushing him into a bedpost. "You'll hate yourself in the morning."

"But I hate Potter now!" Draco howled. "So much! So much!" He grabbed Terry's robes. "You have to stop me, Terry. I'm a man possessed. I can't help myself. No, don't listen to me, I'm raving. Let me go, and you can buy all your sisters pretty things."

Terry looked consideringly at Draco. "It's sweet you're trying so hard to be loyal to your friend," he said slowly. Draco stiffened in mortal offence at the word sweet, but Terry wasn't done yet. "I think you were incorrectly placed, Draco. You should've been put in Hufflepuff."

Draco roared and lunged for his throat. Terry's glasses went flying as they hit the floor.

"I kill you, Boot!"

"Anthony, help me!" Terry shouted.

Anthony turned a page of his book. "Sorry. My mum told me I wasn't to participate in strenuous physical activity of any sort."

"Kill you dead!"

The next day, everyone had cast 'Reparo' on Terry's glasses and they were still hopelessly crooked, and Draco's nose was still tender but not actually bleeding anymore. Hermione told him she was very, very proud, and Draco told her that the thought of seeing Potter for the next six years had drained away his will to live.

She went and poured out the tale of Draco's nobility to her dim little matched set, and Draco felt obliged to stop by the Gryffindor table and set things straight.

"This changes nothing," he announced. "I'm going to get you."

Potter glared at him, hastily swallowed a mouthful of toast and mumbled, "Not if I get you first."

Draco grinned at Terry and Anthony. "Hear that, boys? A Gryffindor is planning to get me. Oooh, I'm so scared. However will I outthink him?"

"You should definitely be in Slytherin," Weasley said in his snotty Weasley way. Draco was

pleased to see Hermione elbow him in the ribs.

Terry slung his arm around Draco's shoulders and Anthony pushed into his side.

"Aw," Terry said. "But we'd miss him."

That day Draco wrote an Owl to his father to say he didn't want to go to Durmstrang next year. He'd made friends in Hogwarts, he wrote. He liked it there.

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It wasn't long before Potter and Weasley had dragged Hermione into another of their illicit little schemes: Draco caught them talking furtively and going through books, they were the least subtle plotters in the world.

He had a plan to learn lots of really cool Dark Magic, challenge Potter to a duel and beat him so comprehensively that he moved to Bermuda in shame. He also had a plan to get Hermione transferred to Ravenclaw where she would not be lured away from the paths of virtue.

These plans all had to be put on hold when he realised that the end of year exams were mere months away and Hermione looked likely to beat him in every subject. Draco could not imagine what his father would say if his son the Ravenclaw came in second-best.

He stayed in the library, reading even when Madam Pince put the lights out. He lit his wand and read under the bedclothes until Terry took his books away and hid them. He perfected a

system of walking and reading at once, which worked when he got Crabbe to walk in front of him to all his classes, but did not work when he was walking towards the library and an inconsiderate prat strode into him.

"McGonagall won't listen and Snape knows how to get past Fluffy and - walk much, Malfoy?" Potter snarled.

Draco shut his book and wistfully contemplated hitting Potter sharply on the side of his fat head. "Don't think I don't know what you're up to," he said coldly, and was gratified when Potter froze. "You're planning to do something unlawful again, and you're talking about it in cunning code!"

He was pleased to see by their very still faces that he had guessed exactly right, and then he got back to studying. He imagined that all this activity would distract Hermione from her studies, which was all to the good - not that he wanted Hermione to do badly, but nobody had the same expectations of her. Draco's father was a politician and on the school board and managed the estate and he was one of the most respected wizards in England, whereas Hermione's father was just a dentything.

When the summer exam finally came around, everyone in Ravenclaw was so tired they wandered around like studious tortoises. Draco switched all of Michael Corner's book covers and it took Corner thirty minutes to realise and then thirty more minutes to tell Draco exactly what he thought of someone low enough to sabotage someone else's study. Draco nodded, triumphantly counted off the minutes as Corner talked, and congratulated himself on the entire hour of study Corner would never get back.

"I've learned my lesson," Draco promised, and left a window open near Kevin Entwistle's notes.

Finishing the exams was a beautiful and triumphant moment that Draco probably would have appreciated more if he hadn't been so exhausted he passed out on the lawn with his head in Goyle's lap. He forbade anyone to talk about that ever again.

At the end of year feast, Draco looked blearily and bitterly over at the Slytherin table, and then at the hall draped with Slytherin colours. This should be his celebration, he thought, his moment of triumph at the end of the perfect school year that would make Father proud of him. That was what he'd planned for.

When Dumbledore announced he was arbitrarily giving the House Cup to Potter, Draco thought for a moment that he must have heard wrong and that the yellow and red flags dancing in front of his eyes were a hallucination caused by stress. Then Terry had to hold him down.

"Just because the man's president of the Geriatrics' Harry Potter Fan Club doesn't mean he can dangle the House Cup in Slytherin's face and then snatch it away!"

Hermione came over to him, flushed with victory. Draco had never been less happy to see her.

"Perhaps Dumbledore could have explained things more," she said, cutting Draco off mid-

tirade. "But I think - we really did something that helped the wizarding world."

"Did you? Did you? Then you should get a shiny medal," Draco snapped. "This is a school. People should get house points for classes, not for helping the world. Slytherin deserved that cup!"

Potter arrived to take Hermione away from their bad influence (ha!) and favour Draco with a glare. "You're not in Slytherin. Get over it!"

"Have a good summer, Potter. Die a painful death," Draco advised.

Once Potter was gone, he made a small piteous sound and let his head fall onto Terry's shoulder.

"Take me away from this awful place," he moaned. "My eyes hurt."

*

"I'm afraid someone's strained their eyes reading in the dark!"

Draco looked around with the hopeless hope that the healer was speaking about someone else, and met his mother's raised eyebrows.

"That happens?" he yelped. "Nobody ever told me that could happen!"

"Well, Draco, to be fair, we never thought it was going to be an issue," Mother remarked dryly. She glanced at the healer and added graciously, "Surprise Sorting into Ravenclaw" as if she was giving an actual reason for Draco's horrible sickness, like: "Mice bit him in the eyes."

The healer nodded. "Happens all the time." Then because she was talking to Draco, she switched back to her air of manic happiness and disconnection from reality. "Someone's going to need glasses!"

Draco's mouth opened and closed soundlessly as he realised this devil woman was seriously proposing to disfigure his face with an unholy contraption.

He stared up into her merciless smile and croaked: "Can't I get a seeing eye dog?"

"A seeing eye dog that reads for you?" Mother asked, sounding heartlessly amused.

Draco curled up sulkily in his chair. "It could be a magic dog. Can't Father buy me a magic dog?"

"You're a funny little man, aren't you!" said the healer, and gave him a roguish wink. "Now, I think I know what kind of glasses you'd like. The Harry Potter frames are very popular this year!"

Draco's glare made her back away, but it did not make her die slowly under the sheer power of his remorseless hate.

"I don't want the Harry Potter glasses," he said in a voice of ice. "I don't want glasses at all. But if I must have them, you might want to show me something tasteful."

The healer still looked shaken from Draco's murderous gaze. "Isn't he a dear little lad," she said nervously.

Mother smiled serenely. "I like him."

"By tasteful," Draco said, "I mean expensive."

*

On the third hour of their trip to buy school books, Draco had received four quelling stares, eight glimpses of Dark Objects concealed in his father's robes, fifteen sharp lectures on what a disappointing Ravenclaw son Draco was and no actual school books.

"We shall go to the bookshop momentarily, Draco," said Father. "Try to contain all of this Ravenclaw spirit. Quite frankly, it makes me nauseous."

With that, he swung into Borgin and Burke's. Draco trailed sullenly after him, and a horrible little shopkeeper leered at him and had the temerity to remark that Mr Malfoy must be proud of such a fine lad.

"Positively overcome," Father said. "Sorted into Ravenclaw, and allows a Muggleborn to beat

him in every examination. It gives me a warm glow."

Draco thought of long, long hours of grinding work, and his back aching, and his current state of being disfigured around the eyes. He glared up at his father.

"I came second in my entire year," he said coldly. "Most people would think that's pretty good."

"Pity you didn't work just a little harder."

"I did work hard!" Draco snapped. "I worked as hard as I could and she beat me because she's-" The words smarter and better hung on the air between them, but Draco swallowed them unspoken. Admitting something like that would be... Father wouldn't like it.

"Try to behave, Draco," Father said at length. "Once we're done here, I shall take you to your precious bookshop and then home."

The fact Draco was being punished was unspoken, too. Father had said he might buy him a broom today.

Draco looked around the small, dingy shop full of creepy things, where even the light was dyed pale brown, and tried not to care. He'd deformed his eyes studying last year: if he wanted to beat Hermione this year, he would have no time for flying.

Knowledge is power, he could say to his father when he came first, and his father would be

proud. Knowledge is power, Draco repeated to himself, and wandered over to something he recognised as Hand of Glory from library books. A Hand of Glory sounded pretty powerful to him. He could smite Potter with it, probably.

Oooh, or a shiny cursed necklace. He could send it to Potter, with the clever pretence that it was from one of his fans, and then - no, wait, Potter only thought he was a rock star, he probably wasn't interested in bling.

His father's icy disappointed-in-only-son silence left only the sound of a cabinet breathing.

Draco choked down a scream and reminded himself that it was probably just a Boggart, just a Boggart, nothing to worry about at all, not at all! He looked around to see if his father and the shopkeeper had noticed his panicked leap backwards, and they seemed occupied, so he went cautiously closer to examine the Boggart. It'd probably get him extra points in his Defence Against the Dark Arts essays if he'd seen one, they were third year material.

There were eyes gleaming in the slit of the cabinet. Eyes! His greatest fear had eyes!

Draco pulled himself together sharply right about the time he noted the familiar glint of glasses, and worked out that inside the cabinet there was probably a mirror, and Draco had been hearing his own breathing. Draco rolled his eyes, thankful that nobody had seen him making a twit of himself, and flung the cabinet door wide.

Instead of a mirror, there was Potter, looking guilty and grubby. Draco clung to the cabinet door as his only means of support.

"Are you stalking me?" he asked in an agitated whisper.

"No! Malfoy, don't be such a freak!"

"Are you stalking Mr Borgin?" Draco pursued.

"No, I... why are you wearing glasses, Malfoy?"

"Why are you wearing what appears to the contents of the inside of a chimney? Do you roll in your own filth?"

Draco composed a newspaper article in his head about the way Potter dirtied himself up and then launched his befouled form on Knockturn Alley. Potter glared at him, glasses broken, and Draco would have sold his soul for a camera.

"I knew you'd be an ass about this! That's why I got into this stupid cupboard!"

Potter was hiding from him! The campaign of terror was working brilliantly and he, Draco Malfoy, was the best there had ever been. He could feel a truly spectacular sneer coming on.

"Really? Because I've heard rumours about your home life, and I just assumed you moved from cupboard to cupboard as you made your way about the world."

Potter went a little red under the grime. "Well, you're pretty stupid. Even your dad thinks so."

Draco was going for his wand when Father strolled over to them, and interrupting Draco's plan of attack was a cruel deed that Draco was sure qualified as parent/child abuse.

"What is that?" asked Father, lip curling.

"I can't tell you," Draco said. "You told me never to talk about him in your presence ever again."

"Ah, Harry Potter! Charmed," said Father. Potter remained quiet because he was a sulky little cupboard-living gnome. "I am Lucius Malfoy."

"I know who you are," Potter said coldly. Father's practised smile flickered and died on his face. Potter kept glaring. Nobody was paying any attention to Draco at all.

"I know who you are too, Father. Can we go to the bookshop now, or should we continue to mingle with the lower classes?"

Potter looked at him, but Father's eyes stayed fixed on the precious Boy Who Lived's filthy face.

"Do you wish to make purchases here, Mr Potter, or do you need an escort to the bookshop? Draco and I would be so pleased if you could accompany us: Draco has talked about nothing but you all summer long."

Draco made a strangled sound of denial and rage. Father gestured for Potter to lead the way and Potter, very slowly and keeping a weather eye on Father, climbed out of the cupboard. Father gave Draco a small, unnecessary push and breathed in his ear, "Try to have a little dignity, Draco."

The push left him walking beside Potter, who muttered: "What's it like to be so rotten your own father doesn't like you?"

Fury made Draco's teeth hurt, but Father was watching and so he said in a pleasant tone, "I'm sure you would've found out if your father had lived. But he didn't, did he?"

Potter went dark red under the dirt and Draco, cheered by this small victory, put the maneuver he'd been practising into effect. He slid his glasses down to give Potter a withering look over them, and then pushed them up and looked away with elaborate indifference.

When he looked back Potter was glowering. "You got those glasses just to mock me, didn't you."

"You are so self-centred it makes my brain hurt," Draco told him. He felt almost fond of his disfiguring ocular device for a change.

His and Potter's charming tete-a-tete was interrupted at this point by a cloud of hair, which once Draco stopped being overwhelmed by its sheer volume turned out to be attached to Hermione. She flung herself in Potter's direction.

"Harry, we're all looking for you, Mr Weasley's cornered my parents and he's talking about plugs - where have you been? Your glasses are broken."

"Letting him off his leash was a bad idea," Draco sniffed. "See how he rolls in nasty things when you're not there to tell him firmly to sit and play human?"

She turned to him, glowing, and he stepped back sharply, aware of his father's eyes. "Not when you have Potter all over you, please."

"It was nice of you to bring Harry back," she said, looking mistily proud.

"He didn't," Potter yelped over Draco's assertions that he had planned to drop Potter into the Thames.

"Draco," Father said icily. "We need to get your books. I have no desire to stand here prattling about plugs. We and this young lady clearly move in widely different social circles: I am happy to say I have never seen a plug."

Draco did get a chance to talk to Hermione when Father and Mr Weasley actually brawled in the bookshop. It would probably be in the papers, that father-of-fifteen would probably give Father rabies, but there was little Draco could do about it.

"Good summer?" he asked in a low tone. "These Lockhart books look like so much wastepaper."

"Oh, no, Draco, I think they'll be a terribly valuable class guide and a fascinating insight into the life of one of our most celebrated wizards," Hermione told him. "Also he signed mine, look!"

"What is it with you and idiot celebrities?" Draco inquired, pitching his voice so Potter could hear the question.

Hermione rolled her eyes, Potter continued with his lifestyle choice of looking grumpy and unwashed, and a bit of redheaded fluff that looked Weasleyish in origin narrowed her eyes.

"Harry's not an idiot," she said in combative tones, and then returned to eyeing Potter hungrily. Draco couldn't blame her: probably the Weasleys couldn't afford to keep her fed.

Draco practised his new glasses maneuver again, and was pleased when both Potter and the Weasley girl went red. He was planning to follow up on the look, of course, but at that point he had to go home with his father nursing a black eye, as if he was a Quidditch hooligan, and he only had time to tell Hermione he hoped she'd remember to hose her pet down.

They sat in the cold carriage and glared at each other all the way home.

His father said: "How many times have I told you it is not wise to appear less than fond of Harry Potter? And that consorting with Mudbloods is vulgar?"

Draco crossed his arms over his chest and said: "Wrestling with a Weasley? Try to have a little dignity, Father."

His father did not speak to him from that point until Draco went back to school. Draco went back and forth between pretending not to care and being so angry that he almost didn't.

Still, the whole incident left him reconciled to his glasses.

*

The year began well, it really did. Michael Corner snickered at Draco's glasses and Draco cast Jellylegs on him, at which point Terry looked stern.

"Take that curse off, please. Though they suit you."

Draco eyed Corner's twitching form. "I think that suits him," he said wistfully, but he let Terry have his way. Damn Terry and Draco's own extreme weakness in the face of compliments!

Of course, the world was out to get Draco, and everything was downhill from there. Potter tried out for his Quidditch team and immediately everyone was wandering around raving about the best Seeker since Charleston Weasley or something, as if Quidditch was as vital and important as the breath in your lungs and the wind in your hair and he hated that stupid glory hound so much it interrupted his studies.

"Harry really loves Quidditch," Hermione prattled. "I do hope it won't interfere too much with his studies, but it's nice to see him happy."

Yes, fans and fame and the ability to pick and choose and reject friends all over the place, and on top of all that, Potter had Quidditch too. How nice that he got everything.

Draco stared at his book and thought hard about how much he disliked Lockhart in an attempt to distract himself from choking and dying on Potter hatred. This became more difficult every time he emerged from the library and almost tripped over some boy begging for Potter's autograph, or the Weasley girl and autograph boy indulging in a competition to get his attention. Because Potter deserved for everyone to love him. Really.

The girl twit even got in the way stumbling around and looking pale when Ravenclaws were trying to see what all the commotion on Halloween night was about.

Draco solved this problem with a hard shove and an "Out of my way or die, Potter Fan 93!"

It turned out to be a silly frozen cat, which Draco did not think was as exciting as bodies, but then Terry made a soft, sharp noise of concern and Draco looked to see Anthony's pale face.

"Ah," he said, and then saw them looking and tried to smile. "I... think my mother would probably write a lot of letters if she thought I was going to be murdered by the Heir of Slytherin."

"It could be a bad joke," Terry said, his voice wavering.

Draco elbowed Anthony sharply. "Pull yourself together," he said, his voice sounding harsh

and odd in his own ears. "It might be the Mudbloods next, but it's not going to be one of my friends."

Terry looked aghast at the word, but Anthony gave a faint, reluctant smile. Draco adjusted his glasses and his blue scarf, crossed his arms over his chest and repressed the urge to kick the stupid frozen cat all the way to the lake where it would sink and everyone could forget and Anthony could stop looking like that.

*

He kept getting Owls from his father talking calmly about the Heir of Slytherin and telling Draco to just watch things unfold. He didn't write back, because while purebloods were obviously superior and Hermione was probably an aberration or perhaps had been switched at birth, he still didn't see why the bloody Heir had to come along and ruin everybody's lives. His house didn't have any stupid Heirs in it.

"If we did," Anthony said, "they'd probably just wander about the place being really good-looking."

Draco lowered his book interrogatively.

"Oh, yeah," Anthony went on. "I've been looking at pictures of Rowena Ravenclaw, she was really fit. We're the house of attractiveness."

"How on earth did you get in?"

Anthony flipped him the bird. "I don't know, but I know how you did. You'd be very attractive to any number of little female rodents."

Draco thought being in the house of attractiveness and powerful knowledge was cooler than being in the house of being an animal-torturer and upsetting the already fragile balance of Hermione's mind, anyway. She was darting about the place dragging her twits into ladies' bathrooms (Potter and Weasley were utterly, utterly lost to decorum) and muttering dark things about Blaise Zabini. The only thing that cheered these winter days was Potter hurting himself at Quidditch. Oh, he must be utterly top notch, since he couldn't keep his scrawny orphan frame intact. Draco had never hurt himself at Quidditch.

Autograph Hunter got frozen next, and Anthony got more and more tense and ate less and less, and hating Potter became almost a welcome distraction from shouting at Anthony when Anthony looked unhappy. (Draco was not exactly a nurturing person.)

Draco thought about stupid Potter and his stupid Quidditch now and then, off and on, until the moment where Professor Snape said Draco could have the pleasure of hexing Potter, and by the way, this snake spell he knew might be of interest to a dedicated student like Draco.

Professor Snape should be made first headmaster and then king, and it was not his fault that Potter turned it all around by suddenly (of course, because he was so super special) knowing snake language. That was Potter's fault, warping the universe and spoiling Draco's life, just to make himself look better.

Draco assumed it was also Potter's fault that Hermione (on Christmas Day, no less) fetched up in the infirmary with fur on her. He was either a drug dealer or a heartless, cruel prankster, why wouldn't Hermione petition for a removal to Ravenclaw?

"They're my friends," Hermione said from under her bedclothes, "and I love them."

Draco made a truly terrible face that unfortunately she could not appreciate, and said, "I think you have Stockholm Syndrome."

She didn't get out until February. Draco was outraged at the incompetence of so-called magical healers whose only solutions were to slap glasses on innocent people's faces and wait till the fur went away, but he did have a few thoughts about how Hermione's absence was improving his chances of coming top.

A few very tiny, minor thoughts. Now and then.

Every time he thought them, he made sure to trip up Potter as a sign that he was Hermione's friend and righteously enraged by Potter's cavalier treatment of her, and then Valentine's Day came and with it, his chance to avenge her properly.

From dawn to dusk of Valentine's Day, Potter was hounded by singing dwarves, singing pixies, and singing First Years Draco had ordered to fill in the gaps. Through a method of careful observation, Draco noted how Potter's face changed from bemusement to embarrassment to despair to weary annoyance, and cackled to himself as he went to and from class.

"Draco, I think you're very disturbed," Terry told him. Draco flapped a dismissive hand at him and dragged him closer to see the effect of the forty-ninth Valentine.

Oddly enough, Potter took one look at the advancing wave of Ravenclaws and went bright red. Draco'd thought he'd stopped being embarrassed in front of other students after Valentine Twenty-Five, but there Potter was, whispering urgently to the dwarf, all red and not meeting Draco's eyes.

A very simple method of getting the attention that Draco required was to yell "I don't think Potter liked your Valentine!" to Potter Fan 93.

"Draco!" Terry said reproachfully. "That poor girl was crying!"

Draco was almost crying with laughter himself, and the burden of feeling almost-glad about Hermione was gone.

Guilt was quickly replaced by horror and disgust at the most traumatic sight of Draco's young life. All he was doing was walking along happily with Potter Fan 93, idly discussing how she'd probably named her dolls Harry and Ginny and conducted a wedding ceremony, watching her lip tremble, and Potter Fan 93 opened a door and then Draco's eyes burned.

Inside the room Penelope Clearwater, one of his fine, upstanding, intelligent and attractive housemates, was canoodling with a Weasley!

The Weasley girl gave a thin shriek. "Oh my God, Percy, I'm so sorry!"

"Penelope!" Draco exclaimed. "How could you? You wanton trollop!"

"Draco, go away at once! It's not what - he's my boyfriend," Penelope said, going red.

"I want to hear no more about your deviant pursuits," Draco informed her severely. "I am off to inform the rest of our house about your spiral into madness."

Penelope and the Weasley leaped after him with pleading naked on their faces, and Potter Fan 93 righteously informed Draco that nothing would make her tell on her brother while Draco negotiated for half of Penelope's Charms and Transfigurations notes throughout her school years, for his own private consumption.

Potter Fan 93 paused, and then said: "Actually, if that git's getting notes, I could use some Potions help."

Draco laughed. "I like a girl who resorts to blackmail," he said, and she half-smiled, and after that he thought of Potter Fan 93 as Ginny.

He still thought she had unfortunate taste in men and did not cease to mock it, however. Those poor, poor Gryffindors. The girls were all right and the boys were blights upon the earth, it was terrible to even contemplate. Draco distracted himself with thoughts about the horror Gryffindor girls faced every day and tried not to think about ghosts and Hufflepuffs being left frozen in the halls.

He laughed when Anthony looked to him. "God," he drawled. "If I'd known he was set on eliminating Hufflepuffs and Gryffindor idiots, I'd have offered the Heir some help."

Terry kept quiet, having worked out that it comforted Anthony when Draco talked like - well, Draco called it talking like a sensible person and claimed he meant every word.

Then the bloody Heir went and Petrified Hermione.

Potter was supposed to defeat evil. That was what they kept him around for! Surely someone would have killed him out of sheer annoyance if there hadn't been any reason to keep him around, but now evil had Petrified Hermione and she'd been Draco's study partner for almost two years and she was lying horribly, horribly still in an infirmary. She was one of the stupid Boy Who Lived's best friends and he couldn't keep her out of the infirmary for two freaking minutes?

Draco organised people to read class notes to her every day, and tried not to listen to any voices in his head murmuring that now his chances of coming top were very, very good.

Because she was his friend, and precious Potter would probably never have terrible thoughts like that, and Draco wasn't going to either. Whenever the thoughts started to arise, he went to the infirmary and looked at her, and he was sure he would not have wished anything like this on her, no matter how proud he might make his father. There were more important things.

Then one day, he saw a piece of paper trapped between Hermione's fingers. It looked

random, and he was quite sure it wasn't. He sat there staring at it, trying to make sense of it, and wondering what to do.

At that point, Potter showed up, Weasley lurking behind him with his freckled face twisted into an identical expression of hatred.

"What're you doing here?"

"Catching her up on her studies," Draco said. "The rest of her friends can't do it: they're all hopeless dullards."

He crumpled the piece of paper from Hermione's hand into a ball, and tossed it at Potter's head. And with the bloody Seeker reflexes Draco had been counting on, Potter caught it, glanced at it and began to unfold it.

Draco got up and left, banging his shoulder hard into Potter's as he went. The Boy Who Lived could figure things out from there and save her: that was what he was supposed to do. That was all he was good for.

Which begged the question of what Draco was good for.

Once Potter had done some mysterious thing and suddenly the Malfoys didn't have a house elf, and Father was in a towering rage, the abrupt cessation of Father's letters indicated he didn't think Draco was good for much.

As if this wasn't enough, Dumbledore decided to make an entire year of work worth nothing by announcing that the examinations were all off. Draco thought of his months and months in the library while stupid Potter played stupid Quidditch, and wanted to rip off Dumbledore's head and spit down his neck. He tried phrasing that in more polite tones.

Not very much more polite ones.

"You remind me very much of a student I used to teach here at Hogwarts," Dumbledore said, his mad eyes twinkling at something over Draco's head. He'd probably taken a headmaster's post to support his drug habit.

"Students used to be taught here?" Draco snapped, whirling away. "Lucky old them."

It was all Potter's fault somehow: he just knew it. But Hermione could move again, and Anthony didn't look scared anymore, and Terry asked him to come stay that summer. They could go visit the Muggle world with his parents, Terry said, and since he and Hermione were supposed to take Muggle Studies together next year Draco agreed.

He thought next year looked promising.

Chapter Two

On the whole, third year was very strange.

Draco'd already felt unsettled by a summer of not talking to his father, and seeing the Muggles with Terry, and having to make his own hot chocolate without the house elf. Dementors on the train did not help, though hearing that Potter had swooned (some hero he was, the faker) brightened up his first day considerably.

Everything was destroyed with his first Care of Magical Creatures class. That incompetent Dumbledore had actually made Oafy a teacher - and hadn't he been expelled in third year? How would he have any idea how to educate students sufficiently to a NEWTS level? - Draco felt sick about it before he saw the stupid Hippogriffs.

"Remember not to insult them," Anthony said edgily, as Draco approached Potter's Hippogriff, who had bowed to Potter and thus could damn well bow to him. "Remember he said not to insult them, Draco, so control yourself for a change - oh, they look vicious, I'm sure Mother would want me excused from this-"

"Don't be an idiot, Goldstein," Draco said briskly, and tried to conceal the thrill of triumph when Potter's Hippogriff bowed down to him with a careless: "See, it's not dangerous at all, the great stupid thing..."

One minute he was tickling behind its ears, the next he was in sheer agony with blood everywhere and screaming at the top of his lungs. In a manly way.

In a manly, outraged way.

"It's killed me!" he howled as Oafy picked him up as if he was a baby. "Put me down at once, you lummo! Hermione, I'm dying, tell my mother that-"

"Yeh're fine," grunted So-Called Professor Hagrid. Draco was pleased to notice that Hermione was running along beside them. She was white-faced and clearly understood the gravity of his plight.

"How would you know?" he snapped. "You are not a qualified healer. Take me to the nurse at once, you murderer. Hermione, stay with me!"

"Of course I will," Hermione whispered.

"Good," said Draco. "He's probably planning to dispose of the evidence by throwing me into the lake."

His first thought was to write to his father about this insanely dangerous class where he would learn nothing and everyone would fail their NEWTs. Except for Potter, probably, since the overgrown lout loved him like his own dwarfed offspring.

Then he lay back against the white sheets, wincing, and remembered that his father was not the sure refuge he had once been. Draco was not going to risk the humiliation of running to Father and having him turn away. Draco was going to have to do this on his own.

When he and Hermione sat in their first Muggle Studies class and Draco heard the terms 'labour' and 'union' for the first time, he had a truly brilliant idea.

Draco went to Hogsmeade on his first trip and bought a pair of handcuffs, which earned him a very offensive look from the shopkeeper. Then he found out where Dumbledore's office was, examined the griffon doorknocker, and decided it would do very well.

He handcuffed himself to the doorknocker, and murmured all the wards he'd looked up over the handcuffs.

When Dumbledore came out, even the Head Fruitcake himself looked slightly less amused and omniscient than usual. "Mr Malfoy... what are you doing?"

Draco glared at him. "I am staging a protest. The students of Hogwarts are being deliberately endangered by the appointment of an ill qualified teacher, and someone has already been hurt with no consequences for said buffoon. I have students who will testify to my claims! I have appointed myself their representative, and our demands are as follows: Fire the imbecile!"

Dumbledore stared at him. "Certainly not!"

"Right," Draco said. "Then I'm not moving. This is a peaceful protest and you can't make me. I will overcome!"

Terry came up to him with food four times a day. Anthony did not come for three days, and then arrived with a placard that said 'Free the Ravenclaw One!'

Hermione came at once and raged at him (as was her way) that Hagrid was a very good person.

"Doesn't make him a good teacher," Draco snapped. "Do you think anyone'll want to take that class for the NEWTs? Just because you like him, doesn't mean we don't have the right to proper classes. Don't go all Potter and partisan on me now."

Hermione breathed out hard through her nose and said, "I don't see why you hate him so much."

"Er, because his poor teaching skills got my arm gutted like a fish?"

"I was not talking about Hagrid," Hermione flashed, and stormed away.

She came back with all of her notes from all of their shared classes, and told him that he might as well give up because she was going to help Hagrid with his lesson plans and make him a better teacher, which was a much more constructive approach.

Once Hermione broke the news of impending 'Blast-Ended Skrewts' to people, Draco woke

from an uncomfortable doze on the stone floor outside Dumbledore's office to the shouting of quite a lot of students. He looked around and saw people from every house assembled there.

"What do we want?"

"To keep all our fingers and toes!"

"When do we want it?"

"Now!"

"Free the Ravenclaw One!"

On the fifth day, Draco was told that a Professor Grubbly-Plank had been moved by the students' clear and urgent need, and had replaced Professor Hagrid. Oafy was to stay on as her assistant, with the view to replacing her in a few years, once he was properly trained.

"You certainly have the strength of your convictions," Professor Dumbledore said dryly as Draco unlocked the handcuffs.

Draco privately suspected that what he had was the strength of his burning rage, but he smirked and said: "Free the Ravenclaw One," for the last time, before heading off to his dormitory and a lovely twenty-hour nap.

He awoke to a world gone mad for Quidditch. Apparently nothing on earth, let alone Draco's signal victory over the forces of oppression, was as important as Potter taking the House Cup from Slytherin by winning every single one of his games.

It took Draco all of four minutes to come up with a brilliant plan.

"You're mad," Terry said flatly.

"I wish you would stop saying that," Draco said. "It'll give me a complex."

"I wish you'd stop being mad," Terry told him. "We're not helping you. We're not enabling you."

Draco looked appealingly at Anthony, who gave him a serene smile. "Mother wouldn't like it."

Several weeks later, Draco went to Crabbe and Goyle, who were his true friends and never questioned him and anyway had much broader shoulders to stand on. They told him his plan was brilliant. They knew how to properly appreciate his very great genius.

And when he stood on Crabbe's shoulders and saw Potter tremble on his broom for one moment, he knew that he had finally and comprehensively won.

Then Potter raised his wand and sent a ghost stag to run them down, and Draco was crushed by the entire weight of Crabbe's body and humiliated in front of the entire school.

Not only that, but Hermione did not exactly come rushing in with the womanly sympathy, either. "I can't believe you'd try to sabotage Harry's game!"

"I can't believe nobody cares that he can make ghost stags!" Draco shouted, batting away Terry's cold cloth. "He's not learning that in normal lessons, you know. This means private tutorials! That's cheating, that is!"

"You were cheating as well, Draco," Terry said, persisting in his cold-cloth activities. "And you were cheating in a very silly way, too. Try to think like a Ravenclaw."

Draco's triumphs always ended like this, and it was always all Potter's fault.

*

As far as Draco was concerned, anyone after Potter's blood was welcome at Hogwarts. Sirius Black was a relative, as well. Possibly wanting Potter dead was part of Draco's genetic heritage. Draco regarded it all rather in the light of a Christmas present.

Another Christmas present was that Potter and Weasley finally did what Draco had been expecting them to, and threw away a pearl greater than all their tribe. They fell out with Hermione, using the completely implausible excuses of cats and rats and brooms and whatever else they said to conceal the fact that Hermione's intelligence obviously made them feel small.

Hermione and Draco studied together for five days after the Great Schism before she broke down and wept on him. He tried not to die of terror.

"I always thought that they'd change their minds about being friends with me," she said in a low voice, twisting her inky hands together. "I always thought they'd remember all the reasons they had - not to like me." She swallowed and looked up, her eyes round and wet. "I never had any friends until I came to Hogwarts."

Draco wondered exactly how insensitive it would be to tell Hermione that emotional displays made him feel all panicky and dizzy.

Hermione laughed, a sharp bark of a laugh, and began to ruffle through their notes. "I waited for them to get annoyed with me, and for you to - I know the way you were brought up. I know you're supposed to hate the Muggleborn."

"Well, I do," Draco said automatically, and then was amazed and relieved when Hermione laughed a bit more normally. "I mean... I was just using you for your notes," he said, and it was all true but there were other things that were true as well, and Hermione laughed again and leaned against him and sniffled as if she'd heard them, too.

Draco patted her on the back and said: "You're weeping onto our schoolwork, woman. If you were in Ravenclaw you would learn more respect for your studies than this."

He gave her a very severe look over his glasses and she choked laughing. Madam Pince gave them that Mr. Malfoy You Are My Least Favourite Ravenclaw Ever look, but Draco accepted her undying librarianly hatred in a good cause.

Potter and Weasley's total lack of ability to appreciate Hermione meant she was always around, and Draco was fairly certain that Anthony developed a little bit of a crush on her. Actually, once they'd all seen her flow charts, he was fairly certain Padma Patil had developed a little bit of a crush on her. Ravenclaws knew how to value a scholarly woman.

Whenever they passed Potter and Weasley in the halls, Draco slipped an arm around Hermione's shoulders, smirked pointedly in their direction and began to use words they could never understand like 'lexicon.'

Those were good times, despite the fact Potter sicced a ghost stag on him. Draco took his revenge with more Sirius Black jokes.

Certainly, you had to give the man props for making sure Potter couldn't go to Hogsmeade. Once Hermione unwisely let that slip, Draco made sure to mention in every class he shared with Potter just how delicious Butterbeer was, just how much he was looking forward to Zonko's, and just how terrible it would be to be kept away from Hogsmeade as if you were a scared child.

"Did you see his horrible scarred face?" he asked, almost skipping with glee as he, Anthony and Terry explored every inch of Hogsmeade.

Terry sighed. "I don't see why you need a nemesis at thirteen, Draco. You've got to control these operatic instincts."

"After three years, it would be nice if we could stop talking about Potter," Anthony said. "We could talk about this house instead! It's called the Shrieking Shack because it's haunted, you know."

Draco surveyed the place and was unimpressed. "Surprised your mother will let you near it, then."

"Oh, my mother thinks ghosts are a very interesting psychic phenomenon," answered Anthony, who often babbled on meaninglessly like that for hours.

At that point Draco saw Weasley all alone, and insisted they go over to pay his disrespects.

"Wandered up here all by your lonesome to see a house, Weasley? Bet you'd love to live there. Is it true your whole family sleep in one room, or does poor little Ginny get some privacy in return for putting up with you louts?"

"Shut up about my sister," Weasley said, going an alarming shade of puce.

Weasley was so easy. Draco had high hopes of inducing cardiac arrest before he turned seventeen.

"Tell me," he said chattily, "how long do you think it'll be before you drive her away, too?"

At that point, there was a soft noise like the spirits of the damned all rushing for Draco at once, and then he was badly startled by an arcane fall of mud from hell. All over his hair.

"It's ghosts!" said Anthony, looking unacceptably pleased. "Proper poltergeist activity! My mum'll be thrilled, she doesn't think Peeves is a good example of his kind at all."

"Fleh," Draco protested feebly, trying to speak through dribbling mud. "Where did it come from? Terry!"

"Don't worry about a thing," Terry said at once, trying to scrub Draco's face clean. "I'm, I'm pretty sure it came from the left! No, right! No, left!"

"Terry! This is no time to panic!" Draco yelled, another lot of mud going all over his new winter cloak. He spun to the right and then the left, and Terry tried to follow him and tripped over something.

Potter's disembodied head appeared out of thin air.

"ARGH!" Draco screamed.

"Ah," said Anthony, reaching forward and taking something silvery out of the air, revealing Potter's whole, unghostly form. "An Invisibility Cloak."

"I knew that," Draco said quickly, and tried to slow down his speeding heart.

Anthony examined the Cloak. "Fascinating to get an opportunity to study one up close. They're really rare, have you read Truttlehorn's thesis on them?"

"Er," Potter replied, looking around rather wildly. "Er. No."

While he was looking around and Anthony was looking at the Cloak and everyone else was looking surprised, Draco's heartrate slowed and terror began to crystallise into cold fury.

"Well, well, Potter," he said. "You turned my hair brown. Prepare to die!"

With that, he stooped, scooped up a handful of mud, and threw it at Potter as hard as he could. Potter just stood looking at him for a moment, mud sliding down his cheeks. Then he smiled.

"Right then, Malfoy," he said. "It's on."

With that, everyone was diving for mud except for Anthony, who was clutching the Cloak and saying something about his mother and physical exertion. Draco didn't really hear on account of the ringing in his ears, and after a moment on account of all the flying mud. Weasley was big, and Terry was clever, and neither of them were as fast as Potter. Or as Draco.

He could hear Terry laughing, which didn't suit his idea of a battle to the death, and Father would be horrified at anything so childish and silly, and Draco wanted to win more than anything. When Potter got him full in the face with mud and he went blind, he staggered, remembered accurately where Potter had been standing, lunged and pulled him down by his collar into the biggest mud puddle, just about avoiding it himself.

Potter surfaced laughing and shaking mud out of his shaggy black hair like a dog, and Draco would have pointed and laughed if Potter hadn't been holding a fistful of mud tightly as he might've held the Snitch, waiting for the moment to let it fly.

He let it fly in Draco's face and Draco was fairly certain he swallowed some. He hoped Father would sue Potter when Draco died of mud poisoning, but before his tragic death Draco planned to get a few more hits in. He lunged at Potter and caught him in the stomach, and he had Potter on his back and was shoving mud down his collar when Weasley interfered, Terry jumped on Weasley, and everyone was almost killed in the muddy crush.

Despite Potter's cowardly fleeing behind a bush at one point, and Draco's masterly strategy of retreating behind a tree to regroup at another, victory was practically certain when Anthony spoiled sport.

"Uh. Not that all of this vigorous exercise hasn't been appalling to watch and everything, but it's time to go or we'll be in trouble. Lots of trouble. All of us... Terry, drag him if you have to."

Draco declined to be ignominiously dragged home and went back to Hogwarts with an ill grace. Potter and Weasley followed, each group putting enough space between the other to make it clear that while walking in the same direction, they were certainly not walking together.

Terry kept laughing as if it had all been fun: Draco was merely smiling because of the greatness of his almost-completed victory, and a little breathless. Terry and Weasley yelled a few insults at each other that almost sounded friendly, which meant Terry would get a talking-to once they reached their dormitory.

Professor Snape found them all coming up the Hogwarts stairs.

"Ah," he said. "Mr Potter... why, how strange. Here you are in the company of other students who were all in Hogsmeade, when I know very well that you are not allowed to be in Hogsmeade. Would you like to get clean before you see the headmaster or after?"

Draco hoped he could be like Professor Snape when he grew up, even if he wasn't a Slytherin.

"We met Harry coming back to Hogwarts and we all had a fight," Weasley lied promptly.

"Yes," chimed in Terry, to Draco's incredulous disgust. "A friendly fight."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "Is that your story as well, Mr Malfoy?" he asked, and when Draco looked up at him he saw Snape knew Potter was their common enemy, and he opened his mouth happily to drop Potter in the soup.

Then he caught Terry's reproachful eye, and saw Potter trying to clean the mud off his glasses so he could see Snape properly. Potter didn't look exactly like the calm triumphant hero with mud all over him and his eyes anxious and peering, and Potter'd laughed through the mud, and all of Draco's friends were staring at him...

"Yes," Draco muttered, casting venomous glances all round. "Something like that."

When Professor Snape stalked away, Draco got the distinct feeling he'd disappointed him, which made him feel almost as wretched as the idea he'd let Potter get off scot free.

Once he was gone, horrible Potter smirked at Draco. He was always smirking and sneering, though this smirk was - more hesitant than before. "Sorry for turning your hair brown."

"Sorry for beating you into the ground," Draco scoffed, and swept away with the others while Potter protested vehemently that he had won, which anyone could see was absurd.

You could not go encouraging someone like Potter, of course, it only added to his incredible temerity, because the next day he actually came up to Draco after class and actually spoke to him.

"Malfoy, I was thinking-"

"Don't try to impress me," Draco sneered. "I'm a Ravenclaw. We think every day."

"-about what you said in Transfigurations class earlier this year. About Sirius Black, and how you'd want revenge." Potter looked at him, uncertainly, and Draco didn't know why Potter was asking him this now. "What did you mean?"

Draco put his books into his bag carefully, one by one. Clearly, the mud incident had misled Potter and he thought that Draco'd been condoning his above-the-law attitude to school life: clearly, Potter thought Draco was, he didn't know, another secret fan.

"Why, Potter. I thought everyone knew something like that. The details of precious Potter's life are public domain and everything, or don't you keep up with your press cuttings?"

Potter's lips set in a hard line. "Stop talking like such an idiot, Malfoy."

"Oh, I'm an idiot, am I?" Draco snapped. "At least I know pertinent facts, like that Sirius Black was best friends with your dad and that he was the one who gave him to the Dark Lord. Everyone knows that, and now that you know, maybe you'll be a bit cautious around Weasley, eh? That lot are blood traitors already. You sure you can trust him?"

Potter was white as paper and actually looked a little intimidating, not that Draco would ever have been scared of Potter in a million years. It was just that he was late for Muggle Studies.

"You're lying," he said in a thin voice. "You're making up a rotten lie just to get me angry or something, aren't you? I don't know why I bothered to talk to you."

"Why don't you check with Professor McGonagall or Professor Lupin?" Draco demanded. "Everyone knows. It's a pity you didn't go to them, I doubt you'd accuse them of lying-"

Just Draco Malfoy, who told lies and whose hand people didn't take on trains. Just perfect.

"Why don't you just shut up," said Potter, slamming out of the classroom.

Draco told Hermione all about Potter's disgraceful and indefensible behaviour, and after a mere hour long rant he saw her lip start to tremble. He knew from long experience that she could listen for three hours as long as she had studying to look at, and came to the conclusion that all the extra classes were really getting on top of her. He sent her off to get Hogwarts: A History as a special treat, even though he knew he would just end up having to save her from herself and take it away again.

"Only one chapter," he said indulgently as he heard her come back to the table. "You know all that 'Draco, I wouldn't keep reading it if I was addicted' stuff doesn't work with me."

"I really don't think that's going to be a problem," said Potter.

Draco pulled off the amazing double withering-look-over-glasses and sneer in record time.

"Of course not, Potter. You don't read books, do you? You're more concerned with the pretty pictures."

"Just because I don't lurk in the library like a creepy little animal in its lair-" Potter stopped. "Wait. I didn't - I'm not here looking for a fight."

"Are you here looking for a book?" Draco suggested brightly. "That is what people usually do in the library. I realise you may be unfamiliar with this whole concept, but people do not lurk in here. They go in here to look at these ingenious contraptions called books" - he illustrated his point with generous use of air quotes, and also several more withering looks over his glasses - "which they, wait for it, read. This in turn helps them with their studies-"

"I have no idea how the Ravenclaws resist killing you in your sleep," said Potter.

"I'm so sorry," Draco said. "Was I going too fast for you? Should I use smaller words?"

"I'm here to talk about Sirius Black!" Potter hissed.

Mandy Brocklehurst at the next table looked up at this and whispered, "Oh my God, where?" Potter ignored her because he was a self-centred, oblivious git.

"I asked Professor Lupin and you were right," Potter said slowly, as if this was some kind of big admission, as if Draco wasn't a Ravenclaw and thus almost always right. Of course, Potter didn't have the decency to apologise or anything like that, apologies were clearly for lowly mortals, but he frowned and said: "It was all true. He killed one of my parents' friends, too."

Draco had no idea what to say, but he raised both eyebrows and he hoped it looked scathing. Did Potter have no friends to talk to? Draco failed to see how he could have made his epic hatred more clear.

"Ron says - I mean - what would you do? If you were me."

Run screaming to a hairdresser was Draco's first thought, and he should have said it, but for some unfathomable reason he said: "If it were my parents? I'd want revenge."

He looked up: Potter was leaning against Hermione's chair beside Draco, his brow furrowed. He saw Draco looking and said, slowly: "Yeah. That's... yeah."

Well, everyone wanted revenge and they were done here. Harry Potter needn't think that Draco was forgiving like Hermione, that he could be won with a troll fight or a mud fight or a beckon from the hero. Draco didn't make things easy for people and he didn't hand out second chances and he certainly wasn't planning to make exceptions and crawl for Potter like everyone else did, so he'd be charmed if Potter could go away before anyone saw them and thought something filthy, like that they were having a civil conversation.

He gave Potter a look over his glasses, but Potter did not appear to get the hint. Draco breathed out hard through his nose.

"Run along," he clarified, and then saw Hermione coming towards them with a book in her hands. Draco saw the look on her face, and thought he might as well get something out of this very strange encounter. "Potter! Get your fool Weasley to let the rat business go. Hermione misses you pathetic wretches."

Potter blinked at him and Draco took it as agreement.

Then he decided to make himself very clear. "Afterwards you should go find Sirius Black. Personally, I hope he kills you a lot."

He smirked and Potter's face went even darker, with fury that was almost like surprise, because really, why shouldn't everyone in the world be on Harry Potter's side? He glowered murderously down at Draco for a moment and then stormed away.

Draco was pleased things were clear.

*

Sirius Black did not kill Harry Potter. He managed to evade capture by Dementors, the Ministry and even Professor Snape, but he couldn't use his near-miraculous powers to do a tiny little thing like killing Potter. No wonder Potter was strutting about smirking even more than usual, glorying in his amazing powers of not dying and winning the Quidditch Cup by beating people who were frankly not very good.

In the midst of a rant on that topic, Draco got a very dirty look from Cho, and immediately backtracked. "And you," he said hastily. "People who were not very good and you, but you were having an off day. You probably felt sick. You did look directly at Potter's face, which I for one feel was unwise."

"You're horrible," Cho said, but she smiled and looked slightly mollified.

He winked. "I'm lovely."

Actually, he thought that Cho could really have used some advice on her turns and her focus, but he never paid all that much attention to Quidditch, anyway, it wasn't like he was stupid Potter. He was much too engrossed in his studies to notice anything about Quidditch at all.

Besides, Cho always laughed at his jokes and was extremely pretty, which were two things Draco deeply approved of.

It was utterly typical that Draco had to lie to girls so they wouldn't hurt him, and Potter and Weasley could waltz back into Hermione's good graces with nary a word about how they'd cavalierly dropped her. Apparently she'd wept in Weasley's arms, and then the stupid rat hadn't been dead after all, and then the rat was dead again or at least Hermione refused to talk about it. Hermione's confused explanation made Draco jumpy about Inferi rats for days.

"You'll notice I'm not dead yet," Potter took the trouble to inform him on the train home. Apparently that little library conversation had rankled: who knew why, since Draco had been openly hoping for Potter's death since first year.

"I live in hope," Draco returned. "Maybe next year."

Once home, he found out that Hermione's enormous study load had finally defeated her: an Owl came congratulating Draco for coming first overall in his year. He sat with the letter, loving even mad Dumbledore's signature for a moment, one hand pressed against his glasses, and then he went to his father as he'd pictured doing and gave him the letter.

He was all prepared to smile modestly and murmur, "Knowledge is power."

He could taste the words on his tongue when Father smiled and said, "Well done, Draco." He was just about to utter them when Father continued: "And I hear that Potter won the Quidditch Cup this year. You used to be rather good at Quidditch, didn't you? What happened - couldn't face the competition?"

Draco looked at him and lost his grip on words. He just left, and walked through the halls of his home, and thought of all that stupid effort, and all of the stupid coldness between him and Father that he'd thought might just go away, and how stupidly stupid he'd been, never to realise that he was never quite going to be good enough.

Could've been worse. He could've never realised.

The only thing which redeemed that summer was looking forward to the Quidditch World Cup.

Chapter Three

The Quidditch World Cup began with Weasleys, which was so typical of Draco's life.

Father and Mr Weasley exchanged words about Mr Weasley's extreme poverty while Draco tried to make out Hermione's face in a blazing sea of redheads. Once located, she smiled at him. He smiled back, and when Father noticed and frowned Draco made a special effort to smile at Ginny too.

He refused to smile at Potter, no matter what the circumstances, and indeed once he got a look at the shamrock on Potter's robes he quickly discarded his own. He'd support Bulgaria, he thought, and then thought it even more enthusiastically once the Veela came out to dance.

They were so pretty - so shiny - like women Snitches, and if he could just...

"Draco, sit down," Mother instructed firmly.

The burning humiliation arrived a few moments later.

"And don't worry," Mother continued. "Look at your father."

He looked at Father and was perfectly horrified to see him perform a shimmy of his own, presumably to match the Veela in a kind of mating dance.

Mother smiled serenely. "He's always had a terrible weakness for blondes. Every-Flavour Bean?"

Draco looked around and was cheered to see that Potter and Weasley were not laughing themselves sick at his father's expense, but rather making total prats of themselves trying to leap to the Veela. Poor, long-suffering Hermione had her hands full.

After that, with nothing but filthy Father-seducers and Potter-supported Irish peasantry on the field, Draco decided to be sternly neutral, and cheered indiscriminately for every foul. Once or twice he heard Weasley say "Can't sodding believe he's not in Slytherin' but he was confident that Hermione was administering elbow jabs every time.

It was a good match, in that it wasn't a satisfactory win for anyone. Draco was in rather a good mood until Death Eaters swept the pitch and made him upset his hot chocolate and step in his marshmallows and beat an undignified retreat to the woods.

They gave him a nasty turn when they first appeared, and by the time he reached the woods he was in a full-fledged temper. He didn't think it was very clever to get drunk and make Muggles fly about the place. The stupid idiots could have caused pureblood children to get trampled. Nobody was as intelligent as Draco: that was his cross to bear.

He was very relieved indeed to see Hermione, and less pleased that she had Tweedledee and Tweedledum with her, though it cheered him up when Weasley fell over a tree root.

"With feet that size," he drawled, "hard not to."

"Oh, look who it is," Weasley spat. "Your parents out there playing Death Eaters?"

"I'm sorry?" said Draco. "You'll have to speak up, you're so low down the income scale that I can't hear you."

"I said, are your parents out there in cloaks and masks!"

Weasley's face was flushed with anger and he towered over Draco, which was mortifying and Draco wished his growth spurt would hurry up. Mother told him that all the Blacks were tall, even crazy Aunt Bellatrix who didn't like sunlight.

"They're certainly out there in cloaks," Draco hedged. "Are your parents not able to afford cloaks? Mother gives to charity quite regularly-"

"Shut up, Malfoy!" Potter snarled.

Some days Draco felt that was all he heard, ever.

"Oh my God, that was so insensitive of me," he declared in dramatically hushed tones. "Having people talk about their parents must be really hard for you."

"Draco Malfoy!" exclaimed Hermione. "All of you stop it at once, we need to find the others, not stand around saying terrible things to each other! Ron, have you gone mad, we don't even know where Ginny is - come on..."

"Hey," Draco said. Potter banged his shoulder going past and he returned the shove with interest, but when Hermione turned he mustered up a smile for her. "Hey," he said, more quietly. "Keep that big bushy head down, Granger."

She ran back and gave him a hug. Someone was going to have to teach the girl to control these overwrought emotional displays, Draco almost suffocated in her hair.

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As if having his father get drunk and play dress-up wasn't humiliation enough to last Draco nicely all year, almost as soon as he got back to school he was assaulted by yet another brilliant addition to the teaching staff. He saw the paper talking about Weasley's father, looked at the sort of thing they had to say about the World Cup rioters (Draco's father) and he was angry and Potter said something about his mother and the next thing he knew, Professor WildMoodSwings had turned him into a ferret and played squash with him.

Not even the news that Professor Snape and Professor Flitwick had joined forces and stormed up to Dumbledore's office like twin whirlwinds of fury cheered Draco up, but Madam Pomfrey let Terry stay in the infirmary once she had put the ointment on, and that helped a bit.

It did not help when Hermione sneaked in under the Invisibility Cloak and almost induced spasms in Draco's already delicate frame.

"Hermione!" he exclaimed, looking frantically about for his shirt. "I'm not dressed!"

"I'm not all that interested," Hermione said briskly, and then her eyes went wide when she looked properly, and saw the bruises dark against Draco's shoulders and ribs. "Oh, Draco."

She got up onto the bed along with Terry, and Draco did not reprimand her for indecent lusts because he felt too sick. Instead he curled up, concentrated on the fact Madam Pomfrey had said he'd be fine soon (that charlatan) and was not sure if the cool hand resting gently on his back was Terry's or Hermione's. He felt dimly grateful for it all the same.

"I do not like that man," Hermione announced in the steely way that frightened younger students and made Draco proud. "He could have really hurt Draco."

"I am really hurt," Draco said piteously into his pillow. "I fear I may die."

"Yes, yes, quite," said Terry, who never understood the gravity of Draco's many awful plights, nor appreciated the constant threats Hogwarts posed to his safety and wellbeing.

"Maybe it was because of your dad, but - he had no right. Maybe Professor McGonagall will talk to him..." Hermione's anxious, bossy voice was rather soothing, Draco thought. As was the hand rubbing slow circles into his sore back, which by now he was fairly certain was Terry's.

"No m'gonngull..." Draco mumbled sleepily. "Leave it to me. 'm goin' to plan a hor'ble revenge. Hor'ble revenge!"

"Is that so?" Terry asked.

"Muahahahahaha...mm," said Draco decisively, and drifted into sleep with happy, cosy thoughts of mayhem.

Later, he was forced to tell Terry and Hermione that he would lock them in a dark, deep dungeon if they ever disclosed what he was like drugged to the community at large.

As if this was not pain enough and to spare, there was the entire Triwizard Tournament fiasco. At first Draco thought it was going to be cool. No people taunting him by playing stupid Quidditch, and they had World Cup stars and shiny Veelalike girls to brighten up the gloomy old pile. It seemed like nothing could go wrong.

Except of course it could. Of course, Potter had to cheat his way into the Tournament because he was a fame junkie, and instead of getting him help people gave him a super special extra-Champion spot in the Tournament. Which meant the whole school, in an exciting change of pace for everyone, was buzzing about Potter.

Sometimes Draco thought Potter plotted to give him migraines. If Draco had to get a new prescription and ended up with Butterbeer-bottle glasses he would not be held responsible for his actions.

Hermione and her flow charts had always been an oasis of peace for him, and now at this critical time they let him down. Weasley and Potter had some violent lovers' tiff and

Hermione started carting Potter around with her to the library. The library!

"I can't believe you're doing this," Draco said. "After all we've meant to each other. In our special place."

"Would you hush, Harry's very upset," Hermione hissed.

Draco was sure that with the whole world at your feet, the loss of one Weasley was devastating. He cast a sour look over at Potter, who was mooching unhappily about the bookshelves, looking hurt and bewildered by the lack of Quidditch pitches and screaming fans in the library.

It was not just that he hated Potter, which of course he did, with a pure and holy hatred that would burn forevermore. It was that Potter was utterly impossible to study around.

Even though he wasn't playing Quidditch this year, it felt like he was always storming in fresh off the pitch. He was always ruffled and breathing hard or talking too loudly, with no more manners in the library than Crookshanks would've had, if Hermione had decided to drag her cat along. He'd sit down with a book and it would be all of two minutes before he was doodling with his horrible scratchy quills, or sighing loudly, or humming to himself, or in some other restless stupid Potter way driving Draco to distraction.

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you," Draco remarked coldly on the third day of this torment. "Saboteur."

Potter flattened his hair with malice aforethought. How could a person who wasn't even very tall have elbows all over the table? It was too much for anyone to bear.

"What?"

"Look, I need to concentrate, so you have to stop!"

"You're actually quite mad, aren't you," Potter said.

He gave Potter the Glasses Look, and Potter appeared unimpressed, so Draco gave it up and tried to focus his mind on Arithmancy. His mind was a clear, blank slate. His mind was a cool, serene ocean.

Potter began to tap against his teeth with the nib of his quill. If Draco sharpened his ruler he could stab Potter with it repeatedly before anyone had a chance to summon medical assistance. He heard Azkaban was lovely and peaceful this time of year.

He forbore, reached out and firmly drew Potter's arm down to the table, then let go of Potter's wrist.

"This? Must. Stop."

"Look," said Potter. "I'm not shouting in the library or anything, what am I supposed to do, drop dead?"

"Yes," Draco replied instantly. "That would be super."

"I'm really bored! This is - having Hermione as your best friend involves a lot of hanging around in the library, and I'm just not used to-"

"Hang on, hang on, who said you were Hermione's best friend?"

Potter stared at him. "Well, you're not. You're Terry Boot's best friend."

"I fail to see what that has to do with anything. I have a lot of love to give."

The blank incredulity of Potter's stare made Draco realise that his competitive nature had led him too far astray. Again.

"Well," Potter said, leaving the subject of Draco's love pointedly aside, "I'm not weirdly built to enjoy all of this, like you and Hermione. It's not easy for me."

Easy for him, Potter said. Draco thought of the long nights in first year, reading in the dark when everyone else had gone to bed because they all seemed to have some sort of inner discipline he lacked, some motivating force that kept their eyes from straying to the clock or the Quidditch pitch or anywhere but the page. He thought about beating Potter to death with *Hogwarts: A History*.

"Obviously you ought to give up now, then, since everything should be easy for the wonderful and amazing Boy Who Lived. You can feel just as martyred as you like because your pet Weasley bit the hand that fed it, and now people in your school are actually asking you to read the nasty books, but you have no right to martyr me-"

"And it all comes back to you!" Potter shouted. "Why am I not surprised? And shut up talking about Ron that way!"

Hermione's head turned and she began to hastily collect her books from the shelf she'd been lingering at.

"Look, Potter," Draco snapped. "Here's what you do. You try really hard to study and to keep quiet, focus all your energy on it until you're really tired, and then if you're still restless even though you're exhausted, if you genuinely feel that you can't stand it for a minute longer, go out and run around the stupid halls until you have to lie down on the stone, and then come back here and study some more! And now go away and leave me alone," he said in calmer tones, opening a book and taking refuge behind it. "I hate you," he added, to clarify matters. "I hate you, and I hate your face."

Potter was silent for a change, though this minor miracle did them no good. Madam Pince was already bearing down on them, and Draco was chucked out of the library for the second time in his life. Like so many terrible things in Draco's life, it was all Potter's fault.

Something had to be done, and so Draco did it. He stayed up half the night re-writing his study schedule.

The next day when Potter was still there, Draco put up with his fidgets that filled the room.

He put up with the hair-flattening and the doodling and the table-tapping and the alarming number of elbows. He waited, still as a studying panther, for the moment when the clock hit five minutes to.

Then he put down his quill and said: "Potter, you are a constant disappointment to me and to everyone who grew up with the myth of the Boy Who Lived. Your relentless twitching is probably a sign of mental retardation, and I'm sure you only pass your classes because the teachers favour you. Stop humming, stop moving and if possible, stop breathing at once. You cheated to get into the Triwizard Tournament and I am glad you did because it will put you in terrible danger, but I imagine your ego is too massive for you to have even considered that. I hope that the Triwizard Cup feeds you to its young, and in conclusion, your parents are dead."

Potter looked badly startled. "What the hell is the matter with-"

"Shush," Draco commanded. "It is vital that I study. Vital!"

"But you - you-!"

"Spoke to you, yes, because I had to tell you off or combust, which would not have been productive. And you could have interrupted me earlier, but you didn't, which is a shame for you because my next break isn't for another hour."

"Your next break. What are you talking about, Malfoy?" Potter demanded, fixing him with wild, staring, crazy eyes.

"It's all in my study plan," Draco informed him, reaching for that deeply important piece of parchment, his many-coloured plan. It was adorned with leaves and ravens, because even though Draco had made it at four in the morning there was no reason to do a shoddy job.

Potter took it, his face filled with a sort of absent horror. "I'm in your study plan. I'm in your study plan in red letters."

"Yes," said Draco. "I hate the colour red, and I hate you. My studies cannot be interrupted, and this was the only thing I could come up with at such short notice. Please be as quiet as you can, and perhaps I will go easy on you next hour."

"Malfoy, you complete mental patient, I do not need you to go easy on me-"

Madam Pince stopped by their table and fixed them with eyes cold as winter.

"Give me a reason," she breathed. "Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will."

Potter opened his mouth like a fool, but Draco glared at him and he shut it. Then he opened it again right away, to give one of his unacceptably noisy sighs. Draco buried himself in his book and tried not to picture burying Potter in quicklime.

He could feel Potter's eyes sliding around to rest on him more than usual: like Potter's sighs and Potter's humming, his gaze seemed to have an incredibly irritating physical presence all of its own. He caught Potter at it a few times and gave him the Glasses Look, and Potter just

looked away from Draco to his watch, and then when Draco looked away, he looked back at Draco again! It was impossible to work under these conditions!

Draco broke after fifteen minutes. "What is it, Potter? What do you want?"

"Is it time for you to talk again yet?" Potter asked, and then at Draco's outraged stare he said defensively: "I'm really bored!"

Draco had told everyone that Potter was a shameless attention whore, so anxious for love after the tragic demise of his parents that he would prostitute himself for the media and take any attention anyone was willing to offer him, and here was the proof. With nobody to see it but Hermione, who seemed blissfully unaware of aught but Arithmancy in the world.

Life was so very unfair.

*

By the fifth day, Draco's insults had to become more creative. He'd always thought he had a bottomless pit of insults available for Potter, but he'd never thought about being trapped with Potter in an endless cycle of dusty library days.

"Your hair is like a wasteland after war, with no survivors, thorns where fields should be and despair all around. Know that," was probably going too far.

"Right," said Potter. "Why don't you play Quidditch anymore?"

"Time's up!" Draco announced.

"No it's not," Potter replied, trying to lord it over Draco just because he had a silly Muggle contraption watch thing. "I remember - you asked if I played Quidditch, in the robe shop. You said you wanted a racing broom."

Potter was deliberately reminding Draco of the first time they had met so Draco would remember how it was the first of many times Potter had been so very clearly unimpressed by him. Potter's ploys to make Draco feel small were pathetically transparent, really.

Draco dug his quill spitefully hard into the parchment and it broke. "I liked Quidditch when I was very young," he said. "But now I have put away childish things. I need to study: it's pathetic that you have so few friends your only choice now is to be somewhere you hate with someone you hate. What's it like to be so pathetic even Weasley's dropped you?"

Draco saw Potter flinch. That one had stung. "Your mother and father didn't look all that happy together at the World Cup," Potter said, cold and deliberate. "Are they both disappointed in you, or is it that only one of them has seen the light?"

Draco was moving to hit Potter in his stupid fat head when Madam Pince bore down on them like the wrath of God and threw them out on their ears for the second time that week. Draco and Potter glared at each other and then Draco stalked away to his common room, where he could, of course, study all he wanted. Only the library was his place.

His, and Potter'd taken enough away from him. If Potter would just stop existing everything would be fine, and Draco would never have had to sit through Potter winning the Quidditch Cup, seeing his stupid Firebolt cut through the air and knowing, even if he took it up again right away, even if he practised and practised, there was no way on earth that he would ever compare.

One of the reasons Draco was a Ravenclaw was that he did not like to be outclassed. It was stupid that Potter could always manage to make him feel it, and make him feel it was personal.

*

Apparently, the only thing Potter liked more than judging and dismissing people was having some excuse to act instead of think. That was the only reason Draco could come up with for Potter continually shutting books he hadn't read and pestering him.

"What d'you know about dragons?"

Draco didn't even bother to give him the Look at this point, but he felt it was implied. "Big scaly fiery monsters of death," he said. "Are you still involved in your dragon smuggling ring? If you have made Hermione your moll, there will be serious consequences!"

Potter made a funny sound. "I don't even know how to talk to you."

"Don't talk to me," Draco said. "Because I hate you."

Five minutes to every hour in the library became an odd sort of truce, loath though Draco was to admit it, a truce Draco was forced into because if he got thrown out of the library three times in one year he was pretty sure his housemates would lose all respect for him.

Still, that was no excuse for the time Potter said: "Fancy the Chudley Cannons' chances this year?"

Draco should have looked reproofing and paid attention to his book, but instead he found himself saying, "Either you are mad, or you are stupid, or quite probably you are both. The Tutshill Tornados are going to win this year, they have the best record and the best training and their Seeker is the best in the field. Besides, the Cannons' Keeper's wife is having a baby."

"So what? Maybe he likes babies."

"Maybe he'll be up nights all season," Draco pointed out, and then saw the looks Terry and Hermione were giving him and hastily hid his face in his book. "I hate Quidditch and I hate you and I hate Quidditch," he said flatly. "Go away."

"Only you don't," Terry said that evening, while Draco was absorbed in creating something that would finally humiliate Potter to the dust.

"I don't what?" Draco asked. "Is the other guy called Digby?"

"Diggory," said Cho, who, like several others, was craning from their spots around the fire to see what Draco was doing. "Cedric Diggory. Draco, I don't think that's really very kind."

"You don't hate Quidditch!" Terry said loudly. "I've seen the magazines under your bed."

"Terry Boot!" Anthony exclaimed. "You should be ashamed! Draco has a right to his privacy."

Draco did not dare lift his face and meet Cho's eyes. He hated all his dormitory mates so very, very much.

"The Quidditch magazines, Anthony," Terry said in his best weary way. "You could try out, you know, Draco. If you wanted."

"I'd like flying with you," Cho put in. "You've got the build for a Chaser."

"I don't want to," Draco said coldly, and did not mention that if he'd wanted any spot - which he didn't, he was much too busy with his studies - he would've wanted hers.

He straightened up and pressed the badge, and POTTER STINKS leaped out against the blue walls.

"I don't know what your problem is," Potter said angrily the next day, having the temerity to look betrayed and the gall to obviously, deliberately shove into Draco as he was sitting down.

Draco's ink bottle was upset and his shoulder hurt, and Potter glared at him in an unacceptably righteous and aggrieved manner.

"No problem," Draco said icily. "I'm just a big fan of Whatshisface."

Unexpectedly, Potter's mouth twitched. "Cedric Diggory."

"Sure, him," Draco said dismissively. "Big fan. I just know he's going to win the Tournament!"

"Probably," Potter muttered.

That single word jarred so much with everything Draco knew about Potter that Draco put his book down and stared openly. Potter looked intently at his book, which was clearly nothing but a foolish pretence, but after a moment Draco decided to let it be. He had no idea what to do with it, so he lifted his book back up to his face, still watching Potter warily in case he exploded, and then relaxing when he was safely behind his book once more.

*

Draco realised that the entire Potter issue had gotten out of hand when library started overlapping into life, as on the occasion of Anthony's glorious surprise party.

He and Terry had been utterly silent on the subject of Anthony's birthday this year, leaving Anthony wandering about crestfallen. Stupid Corner had hammed it up ridiculously but

fortunately Anthony hadn't suspected, and Kevin Entwistle had been creepily, disturbingly quiet like he always was.

Everything went exactly to plan. Anthony slouched dispiritedly down the steps to the common room, everyone held position, and as soon as his feet hit the last step they released the strange air-filled balloons.

"Happy Muggle birthday!"

"What? Ahh! What?" said Anthony. "Mother doesn't like me to be subjected to shocks like this. What have you done?"

"We know you miss your mum and the Muggle world," Mandy said, giving him a hug. "So we brought the Muggle world to you. See, we're all dressed up, and look at all the Muggle things Terry's dad got us!"

"The cake was baked in an oven," Draco announced with satisfaction, from his place against the sofa back. "I watched the house elves do it myself."

Anthony looked touched and delighted, as well he should, by all their wonderful gifts. Not least of which included Mandy wearing jeans, a teakettle with a real plug attached, a picture that stayed still no matter how long you watched it, and a T-shirt Terry's dad had had specially made with 'EXCUSED FROM LIFE' on it.

The party was in full swing and Draco was wearing Anthony's amulet when Hermione skipped in and Potter shambled in after her. He was invading Draco's turf now, it was too much!

"What is he doing here?" he hissed at Hermione, who only smiled and gave him a hug.

"I wanted to give Anthony his present," she said, as if that explained Potter's invasion of Draco's sanctuary. "Hi. You look funny in jeans."

"Funny debonair?" Draco asked, wagging his eyebrows.

She laughed and behind her, Potter dared to snort. Draco hadn't been addressing him, actually. He'd know when Draco was addressing him from Draco's sneer of hatred.

Hermione, false friend that she was, abandoned Draco and left him lumbered with Potter, who was looking around with an air of vague alarm, as if he totally failed to recognise the people he'd been going to class with for four years. He was also giving Draco strange sidelong glances.

"You're asthmatic?" he said after a moment, gesturing to the amulet.

"Don't call me names when you're in my common room, Potter."

At that point Anthony, bless his heart, saw Draco's predicament and came to rescue him. Which was lucky, since Potter's lips were twitching again, clearly as he thought up another mocking name.

Potter went back to looking vague. "Happy birthday, Alan."

"What?" said Anthony.

"Unbelievable," said Draco.

"Hi, Harry," said Cho, who was too nice for her own good.

Potter crushed birthday cake against his chest, the clumsy fool, and Draco took umbrage at seeing him spoil the cake that Draco had personally supervised.

He also took umbrage at the way Potter looked at him when Draco sang 'Happy Weird Muggle Birthday To You' to Anthony, puzzled and a little cross, as if Draco were - jigsaw pieces that had stuck together, or something. He wasn't, and he took offence.

He blew energetically into the amulet as he'd seen Anthony doing, and wished for the air demon to come and suffocate Potter to death, but nothing happened except for Potter calling Mandy Melanie, and generally acting like a huge dolt. Which was normal enough that Draco let it be normal, and did his Flitwick impression when Cho asked. He wasn't letting the side down, or anything. He still had his Potter Stinks badge on his funny Muggle shirt.

That was the last day Potter had anything to do with Draco's normal life, anyway. He fought a dragon like a big stupid show-off and Weasley was apparently so overcome by Potter's manly, dragon-defeating ways that all was forgiven. Which meant the library almost-truce of dire necessity was off. Over and done with.

Draco said he wasn't wearing any SPEW badges unless Hermione wore his Potter Stinks badges, and proceeded to corner a reporter and feed her a story about Potter's tragic, hopeless love for Hermione. Potter'd had his chance on the bloody train in first year, and he'd made it clear exactly what he thought of Draco then.

*

With the scourge of Potter removed from his studies, it had obviously been foolish of Draco to hope his life would get better.

"Ask a girl to the Yule Ball! I... is it legal to force us to submit ourselves to this kind of humiliation? I don't even know any girls!"

Hermione put down her quill and gave him an outraged look. Sometimes Draco wished she had a better sense of humour, particularly at times when it would have saved him from being eviscerated with the sharp edge of her tongue.

"Any girls who aren't taken," he said much more quietly, and slyly flicked his eyes to where Viktor Krum was lurking about, pretending he could read.

He had been doing this for a while. On the whole, Draco approved. Krum was rich and famous and a pureblood, which was precisely what Hermione deserved and meant if they had babies they'd be practically pureblood and genius athletes. Though if Krum tried anything

fast with a youthful, innocent lady Draco had a plan of dire vengeance just waiting to unfold into Krum's world of pain.

Meanwhile, Draco was trying to work out some way to get the attention of that Slytherin girl, Pansy Parkinson, some way which didn't involve throwing things at her. He liked the sneer on that one.

"I'm not taken," Hermione mumbled, and rubbed her wrists as if they were sore from writing and holding heavy books. Draco looked at her sharply, because he knew Hermione had arcane powers and her wrists were never sore from writing and holding heavy books, and Hermione blushed. "I just thought I'd wait a bit longer," she said, her voice sinking further. "In case Ron's getting ready to ask me."

"WEASLEY?" Draco shouted at the top of his voice, and was promptly thrown out of the library. He saw Pansy Parkinson sniggering at him and crossed her off his list: unfortunately, this left him with a list of nobody.

"I am embarrassed even to know you," Hermione told him sternly as they went down the corridor trying to manage armfuls of books.

"Weasley?" Draco asked. "Hermione, Hermione, I thought better of you than this! Potter was the one I was afraid of, at least he's better-looking and has some money, but Weasley?"

"I don't care about any of that," Hermione told him, and Draco looked at the severe line of her mouth and realised that this was one of the times that Hermione had entirely and irrevocably made up her mind.

Weasley. God in Heaven!

At least the menfolk of Hogwarts were not the only ones writhing in humiliation, however. Hermione's anxious waiting for Weasley to ask her to the ball suggested this, and Draco eavesdropped on some older Ravenclaw girls to confirm it.

Fortunately Draco sitting alone with a book did not arouse suspicion, since Terry was sitting with Anthony and Corner trying to console them over their terrible ordeal asking out Fleur Delacour. They'd both done it at once and she'd made them cry: on the whole, Draco liked her a lot.

"Bloody Beauxbatons lot," Marietta Edgecombe sighed, toasting her slippers by the fire. "French hussies everywhere, ensnaring all the decent Ravenclaw boys. I can't believe they sit with us, it's like Dumbledore is deliberately trying to ruin our Yule Ball. I can't believe we're going to have to go looking for boys outside our house."

"Fleur is awfully popular," Cho said, hugging her knees. Her face was just peeping up from a red woollen comforter, dark hair shining against the material. Draco liked the effect: she looked cute as a button.

"Ha, like you have to worry about going looking," Marietta laughed. "Cedric's been asking to, ah-ha, talk to you about Quidditch, for days."

The dusky red flush in Cho's cheeks matched her comforter. "He's nice-looking," she allowed in a shy sort of way.

"And then of course Harry Potter's been mooning over you all year," Marietta went on. "Spoiled for choice if you want Triwizard Champions, really."

"I don't, of course I don't!" Cho exclaimed. "They both seem really sweet, and - well, obviously I'm flattered, but it would be nice to go with someone I actually know."

Marietta murmured agreement and both girls stared into the fire and looked depressed at the thought of French hussies.

Cho smiled a tiny bit. "Of course, I could get to know Cedric."

"Not Harry?" Marietta asked. "Well, Cedric is better-looking."

"I didn't say not Harry," Cho said. "Only I know Cedric a little more, and besides, Draco hates him, he'd be awful about it for days."

"Ohhh, awfully worried about what Draco Malfoy thinks of you, aren't you?" Marietta murmured in a lower voice.

Draco leaned in to catch the last bit, and the movement caught Cho's eye. She went bright red. "Shut up he's right behind you," she whispered, sounding horrified, and then Marietta and Cho burst into that indecipherable girlish rush of whispers and giggles which no man could hope to make sense of.

Draco had heard enough, anyway. He unleashed the full force of his outrage on the boys' dormitory.

"So not content with taking our dignity, not content with taking our land, Harry Potter is now trying to take our women!"

"What land?" asked Terry.

"What dignity?" asked Anthony, grinning at him.

"Would you all please focus?" Draco demanded. "Cho Chang - our Cho - is being hunted down by that ruthless predator, Potter! Oh, he thinks he can just have everything he wants, doesn't he? The nerve of him! A Ravenclaw - I honestly don't think he can read, I really don't. This makes me terribly, terribly angry."

"We're getting that," Corner said, rolling his eyes in that stupid Corner way he had. "Why don't you just ask Cho yourself? She's pretty fit."

"And Cho, bless her heart, she's too soft-hearted to see that Potter is a - what did you say?" Draco stared at him. Then he slid his glasses down his nose to give him the Look, and when Corner did not flinch he pushed his glasses back up and studied him again. "Hmm," he said. "Interesting idea."

"I think it's a stupid idea," Terry spoke up sharply.

Draco deflated at speed. "You're right. What was I thinking, she's really attractive and she's older and all the precious Triwizard champions are after her, just another thing Potter can have that we less favoured mortals-

"Shut up!" Terry very nearly yelled, and Draco stood stricken.

Terry looked peculiar and Draco thought he might be angry, which was weird and wrong. With anyone else Draco would have attacked as the best form of defence, but he felt sort of frozen in disbelief. This was the way their dorm worked: Kevin Entwistle was creepily quiet, Corner was a swaggering pretty boy, Anthony forbade everyone to do everything and Terry, no matter what the circumstances, was never, ever angry with Draco.

"That's not what I meant," Terry said quietly after a minute, and Draco relaxed. "Cho likes you: most people do, you - with the impressions and everything, you make people laugh. Everyone knows who Draco Malfoy is, and she said she'd rather go with someone she knew. I just didn't know you fancied her."

The relief of it all made Draco beam at him, instantly mollified. He pictured Cho, flushed by firelight and wrapped in her red comforter, and then he pictured Potter's face when he saw that Draco had what he wanted.

His wooing campaign started the next day. His plan of action involved abandoning the library for the common room, which would also give Krum time alone with Hermione to wean her off unfortunate Weasley notions. After all, Draco had to use the advantage of being in the same house for all it was worth, since Digby was far too good-looking and Potter was far too famous.

He sat beside Cho around the table, looking at her squinting at her Arithmancy homework, her nose scrunched up in distress.

"I'll do your homework for you," he offered.

Cho looked scandalised. "Draco, no you won't!" Draco had a moment to fully appreciate how terrible he was at this whole girls lark, and how much he wished he'd been Sorted into Slytherin and made more cunning, when Cho raised an eyebrow. "I can't believe you said that," she went on, shaking her head. "Have you no shame?"

Draco noted that she was smiling just a tiny bit, showing a dimple, and he smiled quickly back. "Not much."

Cho smiled some more and Draco felt warmed by it, and even more warmed when she said thoughtfully: "If you wanted... you could help me with it. You're really smart, aren't you?"

Draco slid his glasses down his nose, looked at her, and then smiled instead of sneering. He was rather self-consciously hoping that it was sexy.

He looked at Cho smiling back at him and said: "I'm brilliant."

The next day, he carried her books to class. About halfway through the day, he ordered a first year to carry them instead, but Cho got that half-amused, half-scandalised look again and Draco decided to keep doing it himself.

At dinner a very good-looking bloke from the Hufflepuff table was glaring at him. Draco glared back.

"So there he is," he said. "My rival, Cedric Digby."

"His name is Diggory, Draco," Terry said, rolling his eyes. "You've got his name on your badge. Read your badge."

As far as Draco was concerned, his badge said Potter Stinks and that was all that mattered. That, and the fact Cho had heard him calling Cedric his rival, and smiled about it a bit.

Since he was getting into this wooing thing, he debated writing poetry that compared her to the Triwizard Cup, but the mockery this idea generated was so intense he gave up and sat around sulking about being a tortured and misunderstood artiste.

Then he went downstairs and told Cho that his favourite Quidditch team were the Tutshill Tornados.

She looked up with a smile from her homework. "Really? Me too."

And then it was easy to slip into the chair beside her and discuss the Tornados' excellent chance at winning this year, and the dead cert that was them getting into the finals, and Cho threw down her quill and ink went all over her homework.

"You really do like Quidditch," Cho said, sounding pleased about it.

"I like your voice," Draco said, and wished the floor would open up and drop him into the Slytherin dungeons where Crabbe and Goyle would shield him from mocking eyes forevermore. Since this didn't happen, he went on desperately: "It's - exotic."

"It's Scottish," Cho told him. "Oliver Wood had the exact same accent."

"Well," Draco said. "Well... it's cuter on you."

Cho smiled and bit her lip to hide it. Draco drummed his fingers on the table and then realised they were now covered with ink, and was extremely vexed.

"D'you need a tissue?"

"Er - no, I am Malfoy of the Black Hand, feared throughout the Spanish main. Look, Cho, d'you want to go to Hogsmeade with me?"

"Yes!" said Cho. "Wait. What?"

"Hogsmeade. There are shops."

Cho waved this enticement aside. "I - I know that, but - we're not going to Hogsmeade again until after the Yule Ball." Cho stopped and looked mortified. "N-not that I'm, that I'm hinting anything - I - oh my God."

She abruptly put her face in her hands. This conversation was spiralling into madness.

"I want you to go to the Yule Ball with me!" Draco exclaimed.

Cho relaxed considerably. "Oh thank God. I mean, yes. I mean..." She stopped, and lifted her red face from her hands, caught his eye, and then looked away again.

"I wanted to work up to the Yule Ball," Draco confessed, because she looked uncertain and she had such long eyelashes. "I hear that I've got a lot of competition for you and your cute voice."

"Well," said Cho, and looked pleased.

After a moment, Draco said thoughtfully: "I'd hold your hand, only mine are an inky ruin."

"You could go wash them," Cho offered in a discreet whisper. "I'll still be here when you get back."

"Right, then. Mind you are. My people have ways of finding you."

Draco was smiling and Cho was smiling, and as Draco made his way to the loos he looked back and saw her pick up her ink bottle and start to blot, smiling more broadly now she thought he couldn't see, and he almost tripped over a chair.

*

The next days brought more beautiful tidings on the mountains.

"Wangoballwime?" Draco gasped, and had to put his head down on the Ravenclaw table at dinner. "He didn't. He didn't say that. It's too good, I can't take it."

Cho hit Draco's shoulder with her fist. "Stop it. I knew I shouldn't have told you. Don't be awful to Harry, please. He looked so embarrassed, and I thought his eyes were going to drop out of his head when I said I was going with you."

"You told him that?" said Draco. "Right. Come here, beautiful."

Cho laughed and rather to Draco's surprise, did not object, so he ended up with his arm around Cho Chang. He wasn't exactly used to having an armful of pretty dark girl warm against his side, but he felt that he could become used to it quite quickly.

"Promise," Cho said in his ear, and Draco promised because girls apparently had powers.

His promise in no way precluded him from enacting, with the varied range of Potter expressions he'd thought up (sad, sad, so sad, and crying for his dead mother) all the versions of 'Wangoballwime?' he could think of for the boys that night. Eventually they asked him to

stop cackling and go to bed.

He continued carrying Cho's books to her classes. She seemed to like it, and he'd always thought girls would have strange requirements like that.

As he walked her up to her Divinations lesson, talking idly about the Wronski Feint, he planned to kiss her. Oh yes, it would be a glorious and spectacular kiss, possibly on the dance floor at the Yule Ball, surrounded by chandeliers and rustling gowns and punch bowls, it would be fantastic. She would be utterly enraptured.

He gave her her books and an absent smile, still plotting the astonishingly wonderful kiss to be, and Cho moved in and knocked against him.

"Careful, you'll spill your books," Draco said.

"Er. Yes. Silly me," Cho mumbled.

Draco wandered down the spiral stairs happily musing on chandeliers and his shining brilliance, when it occurred to him forcibly that he was the stupidest man who had ever lived. He raced back up the few steps and found Cho still standing there, and when she saw him her dark eyes lit up. He stood in the shadowy stairwell and saw chandeliers already.

"Terribly sorry," he said. "Please forget the last two minutes of our lives."

He wanted to add that he was new at this, but he was afraid he was making it excruciatingly clear already, so he stepped onto the step above hers so he could feel tall and manly (instead of the same height as she was, when would the growth spurt come, when?), threaded his fingers through her black hair and brought her mouth to his. Cho's mouth opened soft under his, warm, as if she was happy to be kissed, and her free hand came up to touch his face. He felt her Quidditch-callused fingertips graze his cheek.

He stepped back, and her dark eyes and wet lips shone in the low light.

"See you later," he murmured, and was horribly late for Transfigurations. Potter glared at him as he came in and he just smiled, not even wanting to taunt him, feeling his whole body thrumming with satisfaction.

It was like that at the Yule Ball. Cho stood beside him, glowing in the circle of his arm, as they watched the Champions dance, and he didn't care if other people were in the spotlight. Though he was glad he and Terry had done Hermione's teeth and hair before the ball.

"She looks really nice," Cho whispered as Krum and Hermione floated across the floor. Somewhere, Draco thought that he could hear the faint chomping sounds of Weasley eating his heart out. "Don't you think so?"

"Suppose," answered Draco, who might be new to this girl thing but was not a born fool. "You look brilliant. I like your hair and I like your nose and I like your eyelashes. Good job, Chang. You should be on the arm of a Champion."

"I like it here," Cho said, and leaned against him comfortably.

She lifted her arms and twirled as he turned her, laughing, and they danced well together. Other people, people his father would've considered more important, had wanted her, but she'd chosen him. She liked him best.

It was a novel feeling, like the feel of her smooth hair when he tucked it behind her ears, and her laugh when he kissed her on the dance floor, just as he'd planned. He danced with her and he fetched drinks and then he danced some more: she clasped her hands round the back of his neck.

"I like your dress robes," she said. "You look like a very debonair vicar."

"I've been waiting my whole life for someone to call me debonair," Draco told her. "And I mean that."

She put her lips to his ear. "D'you, um. Want to go someplace more private?"

Draco heard later that Potter and Weasley's dates ran away from them and left them pouting and alone, and that Weasley managed to upset Hermione into the bargain. He heard Anthony got dizzy from all the spinning and vomited on Mandy's dress, and that Terry and Crabbe and Goyle all bonded over not having dates.

He did not actually see any of this, because he spent the later half of the Yule Ball night alone in his dormitory with Cho Chang. The curtains were drawn and there was blue-tinged light all around, and Cho panted out, "I don't want to go all the way," and Draco wanted to ask which way they were supposed to be going, but he had a misty sort of notion and he hoped that he would be able to figure the rest out while convincing her that he'd known all along.

The lots of snogging was excellent, and then Cho removed the top bit of her robes, and Draco froze.

"Er, Draco," Cho said. "You look a bit... Should I put them away?"

"No!" Draco answered sharply. He was quite, quite sure about that, they were extremely easy on the eyes. He was just a little bit terrified of doing the wrong thing, and it occurred to him that if he did all the girls in Hogwarts would be laughing at him tomorrow.

It occurred to him again that attack was the best form of defence, and he was tempted for a wild instant to tell Cho that these breasts were not up to the usual standard presented to him and he dismissed them with scorn.

Then Cho reached up and clumsily pressed their palms together, interlocking their fingers after a brief fumbling moment, and he saw her lip tremble and remembered she had chosen him. He felt like he could love her for that.

"Draco," she whispered. "Do you have any idea what to do?"

"Well," Draco said. "Well - no."

He paused and then reached out with his free hand, traced her collar bone and let his fingers

slide down a golden curve, spilling taut into a cup of black lace. The lace was threaded through with pink ribbon, and the ribbon trembled and the curve of her breast swelled slightly, meeting the hesitant curve of his palm.

He glanced up at her when she sucked in a sharp breath, and smiled.

"But I am a Ravenclaw," he added. "And I love to learn."

A little later, she laughed because his hair was tickling her stomach, and he tried to push it back but she reached down and fluffed it up again, and really Draco would have objected if Cho had not been offering up such a wide expanse of golden skin for him. Since she was, she was welcome to take any personal liberties she liked. So his hair feathered against her skin, and his glasses touched the smooth spot just under her belly button-

"Cold," she said, and then wriggled and laughed a little, which Draco took as encouragement.

She pulled him up to kiss him a significant amount of time later, the material of his robes crumpling and sliding against her damp skin. She had been very pretty in her robes but she was spectacular out of them, and when she pushed at his clothes Draco indulged in the brief prayerful hope that his growth spurt would come right this minute. Or some muscles, perhaps. Or a tan. Anything, really, anything would do, for once he was abandoning his Malfoy right to be choosy.

When she pushed his dress robes off to his waist, Cho didn't actually seem to care that he was skinny - she loved him for his mind, he thought smugly, Ravenclaw girls were the best ever - and she pressed her hands along his ribs, covered over his shoulder blades as if she was worried he'd be cold, and held them there as he kissed her, carefully, lips pressed dry together because she was not really dressed in his bed but Mother said gentlemen didn't presume.

Then she arched against him, and he completely and utterly humiliated himself.

He froze, supremely embarrassed and with his dress robes ruined, trying to think of some way to blame her, but she held him closer and said, "I like you, I really like you," and he kissed her cheek and her neck with enormous gratitude.

It was cold so he drew his blankets over both of them and got a look at her on his white pillows instead of his blue sheets. She wore them both well.

"I wasn't even sure you fancied me," she said in a low, pleased way. She liked compliments: Draco thought they were pretty good himself.

"Be sure," he said, and kissed her again. Their stomachs stuck together a bit and she rolled over on his arm while she was trying to get to sleep, and then it took him ages because her breath was whuffling against his ear. He slept pretty well, all the same.

"I didn't mean to stay here all night," she whispered, sitting bolt upright at some indescribably early hour of the morning. "Oh my God, I am so embarrassed!"

Draco tried to blink the sleep out of his eyes. "Don't be," he said. "Not like you're here with Kevin Entwistle."

"Draco, you're terrible." She put a hand up to her mouth to hide her smile. "I. Quick. Where are my robes? I have to go-"

"No, stay," Draco said dramatically. "I am Malfoy of the Black Hand. Stay and be my captive!"

She laughed again and kissed him with messy, laughing morning breath. Then she escaped despite his protests that he wished to keep her as his ship's woman, and Draco heard her small horrified sound and poked his head out through the curtains to see that all his housemates had just witnessed the exodus of a crumpled Cho Chang from his bed.

"Well," Corner said after a pause. "I copped off with Ginny Weasley, anyway."

"You lucky, lucky bastard. How was she? How was it? Tell me everything," said Anthony, whose mother would not have approved.

"Do not," Draco said with hauteur, "talk about my girlfriend that way." Then he grasped the curtains, lowered his voice and said: "It was fantastic. I am king of everything."

*

Draco and Cho did go to Hogsmeade together, though that involved a lot of shopping with her friends. Draco understood that girls liked to congregate together for a good mass giggle, and amused himself by spending money on himself and her, nobly not thinking that if he'd known friends were invited he could have brought his.

Eventually she said goodbye to them, though, and they went to a place called Madam Puddifoot's that was cramped and over-decorated, but served really, really nice coffee. Draco ordered extra foam and sprinkles and chocolate buttons and a shot of espresso in his, and then said they would like some little pink cakes to be romantic.

Girls liked that kind of thing, he thought, and held Cho's hand over the table.

"I love this place," she said, smiling at him, and he leaned forward with extreme care because of the foam, and kissed pink sugar icing off her lips.

"Interesting, raspberry," he remarked analytically. "Can we kiss lemon next?"

She laughed and they kissed raspberry, lemon and strange blue flavour before they left the shop holding gloved hands.

"I liked the Yule Ball," Cho told him shyly.

Draco assumed this was a lead-in to talking dirty, which he had been thinking about and making a few notes on, but this was a public street and she'd caught him off guard, so he stood there and wondered if just calling her baby would count.

"I like dancing and lights, and romantic things," Cho went on, and Draco abruptly stopped rehearsing calling her a naughty, naughty girl in his head. "I wish we had the Yule Ball every

year."

"We can have the Yule Ball any day you like," Draco told her. "Because I say so. Watch." He used Cho's hand to spin her around down the path, humming his favourite Celestina Warbeck song energetically as he did so.

She put her free hand over her mouth. "You're crazy!"

"No, I'm very spontaneous and romantic," Draco informed her. He was also on a quest to show her he was the best boyfriend ever, so much better than Potter or Digby would have been.

Also receiving more sexual favours would be nice.

It was also nice that she was laughing and looked interested in nobody and nothing but him, which was the way he decided he liked his women, and even dancing on cold streets was a little fun. Other people were looking - admiring his brilliant girlfriend, no doubt - and Draco swayed her and dipped her and laughed when she shrieked, his hands on her hips and his name on her lips.

They passed Potter, Weasley and Hermione as they went by. Hermione looked touched and Potter looked like he wanted to bite.

Four years, and finally Potter's opinion seemed unimportant compared to some things.

Draco took off his gloves so he could take Cho's face in his hands, and she copied him, and they kissed at the end of the street in the freezing cold, with her making a soft sound, moving into his body heat and pushing Quidditch-rough fingers under his shirt.

"You're like a Firebolt of girlfriends," Draco told her. "Which is not to imply that you're fast, not at all," he added hurriedly.

People living sadder and darker lives than Draco were wandering about prattling about dragon eggs and Krum's slightly too busy hands and so on, but Draco resolutely did not care, and went a whole week once without insulting anyone.

Naturally, it was Potter who broke what could have turned into an Malfoy record. Draco realised he was getting behind in his revision and went to the library, where there was so much revision to do that he nodded off on his books.

That was quite a normal event, as was Hermione shaking him out of it.

It was not normal for the nodding off and the being shaken out of it to have three hours of precious study time in between them, nor was it normal for Potter to be calmly reading in the chair beside him.

"You should have told me he was asleep, I couldn't see from the table across," Hermione scolded.

"He looked tired," said Potter.

"How long have you people been here?" Draco demanded.

Potter did not answer, but fortunately Hermione was there to tell him the dreadful truth.
"Almost three hours."

"While I've been... I kept trying and trying to tell you people that he was mentally disturbed, but would you listen, no," Draco muttered. "Everyone knows to wake me when I'm asleep, everybody does!"

"You fall asleep in the library often? I think you study too hard."

"I think that's probably the first thought about studying you have ever had," Draco observed, and looked at the blurry bit on his essay that would have to be re-done, and that meant he had drooled while Potter was there to watch him sleep. Oh, vile.

Draco realised he was peering at the notes more closely than he usually had to, and fixed Potter with a steely, accusing glare.

"Did you steal my glasses?"

"No!" said Potter. "They're right there," he added, gesturing to the desk.

They were indeed right there, but Potter needn't think that was getting him off the hook. Draco snatched them up and, vision fully restored, gave Potter a look that demanded explanations.

"I just thought you'd be more comfortable," Potter said, looking at the table. "Look, I'm just here to find out how to breathe underwater, I didn't know I was supposed to wake you, I'm not in the library all that often!" His eyes left the table and darted briefly to Draco. "You haven't been either, lately."

"You were looking for me?" Draco asked. "How precious."

Potter knew he'd been with Cho and he was jealous. Ha, he could covet Draco's girlfriend all he liked, but she would never, never be his!

"I don't need this," Potter said crossly, because he had the soul of a grizzly bear. "I preferred you asleep."

He was so creepy. He'd really get on with Kevin Entwistle.

"Let's see what you have there," Draco suggested, on a quest to be as annoying and intrusive as possible so he wouldn't have to think about the drooling. He whipped a piece of paper out from Potter's elbow and said: "What you'll miss the most... Did they take your Firebolt away?"

"I don't think so," Potter said, looking very alarmed.

"Could they mean people?"

Potter went pale, and Draco remembered sharply that this was not a crossword puzzle with Terry in the Ravenclaw common room, this was Potter, and the truce was long gone. And he wasn't something for Potter to condescendingly figure out and judge as unworthy again: he didn't need Potter or his father's approval, he had Cho now.

"Wow," he said brightly. "It's a real shame you're in the Tournament, because you'd be totally safe otherwise. Nobody's going to miss you the most."

He waited with a sneer in the wings for Potter to tell him that his entire fan club would be diving into lakes for him, and saw Potter's face go dark and furious.

"I don't need you to tell me that," he said, his chair screeching back as he got up and started slamming his books together. "I don't need you to - I thought you'd only asked Cho to be a bastard, but-"

"I really like her," Draco snapped.

"I know! I saw you two together at the ball and Hogsmeade and - but you're still a bastard, Malfoy, and just when people think they can tolerate you, you-"

Draco almost shouted at him. "I don't want to be tolerated!"

Thrown out of the library, four times in one year.

"You're a rebel," Cho told him, huddling with him against the cold as they watched the lake anxiously for developments.

"Mmm, bad to the bone," Draco said against her ear. "Kind of hoping that excites you - hey, there's Digby with his dad! He's first by miles - True Hogwarts champion! Go, Digby!"

"Diggory," Terry and Cho chorused in unison.

"If you like," Draco allowed generously.

*

It was shaping up to be a pretty good year, what with excellent investigative journalists who were beetles and listened to every word Draco chose to make up about Potter, nobody flaunting Quidditch in Draco's face, and Cho.

Which meant naturally that everything had to go very, very wrong in the most dramatic way possible. They were all sitting in the stands getting very bored watching the fuzzy hedges and eating candied nuts, Marietta was flirting with Terry and having a notable lack of success and Anthony was trying to seduce away Draco's woman by showing her how to work his amulet.

Then there were sparks and people were saying something about disappearances, and everyone was talking loudly and then in the confusion there Potter was, hunched over and...

"God!" said Cho. "God, no, Cedric..."

She turned and put her cold face against Draco's and Draco numbly stroked her back and thought: Dead, someone's actually dead. Cedric Diggory's dead.

Draco could remember his name now that he was dead.

He still felt numb in the common room, when everyone else was whispering You-Know-Who and Cho turned to him, her face tear-damp in the firelight, and said: "I might've gone with him to the Ball... we could've... and now he's..."

"Shhh," said Draco, "I know," even though he didn't at all. He pushed back her ruffled black hair and kissed her as she cried, because she was his and nobody should be allowed to hurt her. She kept crying and the kiss was drowned.

Cho cried again at the Leaving Feast when that old man Dumbledore finally made a decent speech, if you counted the rampant Potter favouritism, and said the Dark Lord had risen. Which his father had always said he wanted, and which would show Potter, but Cedric dying had made Cho cry, and Anthony was being very quiet, and Terry looked sick as well. At the Gryffindor table, Hermione had obviously been crying too.

At the Gryffindor table as well was Potter, looking dreadful, his face white as a bone and his eyes empty. He saw Potter look at Cho and him, as he wiped the tears away from Cho's cheeks with his thumbs, but then Potter looked away without changing expression. He leaned his forehead against Cho's and sort of wished the Dark Lord hadn't bothered.

He felt awful and itchy on the train ride home, waiting to see his father and know what he thought of all this, trying not to think about death - death in his school, in his place, affecting his people - and he thought it might make him feel an enormous amount better to go taunt Potter about all this. Since Potter was supposed to have conquered the Dark Lord, wasn't he, couldn't he do anything right?

He couldn't leave Cho, though. She was upset and she was his responsibility. He wished they could sit with Terry and the others, or maybe go find Crabbe and Goyle, but she wanted to be with her friends. Draco would've wanted to be with his friends if he was upset, so he moodily bought himself an obscene amount of chocolate and let Cho take as much as she liked.

When that hussy Marietta tried to nick some as well, he gave her an arctic look over his glasses. There was such a thing as pushing a man too far.

He sat with Cho for the whole train ride, his cheek pressed against her hair, the window a little steamy with their breath and her muffled crying. He was quiet mostly because his terrible brain kept coming up with inappropriate jokes and comments like they'd be all right even if the Dark Lord had risen. He heard Marietta and Padma mention the words 'his father' and 'Death Eater' when he went out to get more chocolate, but he refrained from tearing a strip off them because Cho would be upset. She was very loyal to her friends, it was one of the things he liked best about her, and besides what else could you expect from a Ravenclaw who was so lost to all propriety that she'd gone to the Ball with Weasley, anyway?

When he positively couldn't bear it any longer, he went outside the carriage and told a passing first year that she was the least promising Ravenclaw he'd ever seen and he expected

she would get a Troll mark in all of her future exams. The cheeky brat told him she was in Gryffindor, as if it was something to be proud of.

He went back in and Cho leaned against his chest, her steady breath against his shirt collar. He kept a firm arm around her while the train jolted to its destination, and when they left the train he was holding her hand.

He saw her parents hurry towards her when they caught sight of her tear-stained face, and he saw the way her parents looked at his father. The Changs were respectable pureblood wizards, and they didn't seem to want to look at his father's face, or be able to whisk their daughter away from his father's son fast enough. He looked after her as she went, pressed against her mother's side, and raised a hand to wave goodbye, but she didn't look back.

Then Draco looked at his father.

"Pretty girl," Father said, and there was an edge to his voice that was trying to be triumph but didn't quite convince Draco. "At least you're getting something good from that house, hmm?" He waited for the eager cue Draco would've given him once, and when Draco stared at him silently he went on all the same. "Exciting things have been happening, Draco. Lots of opportunities for a smart boy are coming up..."

Draco almost warmed to the flattery, but he had to wonder why it was coming now and never before. He kept looking at his father and kept silent, examining his face as if he were one of Terry's puzzles.

He found he had nothing to say, apart from the absurd thought he would not permit himself to utter in front of Father, which was, "Your Dark Lord made my girlfriend cry."

So he adjusted his blue-and-bronze scarf, continued to say nothing, and dragged his chest by himself all the way down the long platform. He followed his father because there seemed to be no other choice.

Chapter Four

Draco spent most of the summer lying about the Manor grounds sulking in the flowerbeds, trying to get the news without speaking to Father and reading his Owls.

He bet Potter was having a cooler summer than he was.

Nobody seemed to know very much about this whole Dark Lord business. Cornelius Fudge was saying it hadn't happened and there was no evidence it had, but he'd said the same about those allegations about him and Celestina Warbeck last year. ('Happy birthday, Mr. Minister,' indeed.) Terry and Anthony mostly commanded him not to correct the spelling of his girlfriend's Owls.

Not that Cho often made mistakes, but she did it now and again. At first it made Draco's eyes burn, but then the letters became less and less frequent, and Draco started to miss the way she could spell out all the quadratic enchantments he was helping her with perfectly, and then fall down on the word 'recieve.'

It was easy enough to avoid Father that summer. He was always busy, and Draco didn't want to think about why he was busy. He spoke to Draco sometimes when he was at home, in the new conciliatory way that made Draco's stomach clench with hope and disbelief and the unbelievable thought that his father might be afraid.

Draco wanted to go back to Hogwarts. He looked forward to the start of school all summer, but then Father took him to the station and went with him to the platform, which he'd never done before, and Draco wanted to go back and live the whole summer again and differently.

"Goodbye, Draco. Make me proud," said Father.

Draco hesitated, standing in the train door, about to be carried away. "I could-" he said. "I'll try," and then the train was rattling off and he felt like he'd made a promise he had no way to keep.

It made him feel tired and cross. He wanted to see Cho, so he went wandering like a sad little orphan around the train, his chest banging into things. After his arm started hurting, he changed his mind: he wanted to see Crabbe and Goyle. They would carry his chest, and he could go find Cho.

Of course the person he ran into was Potter. This was how Draco's life always worked. If life gave you lemons you made lemonade, apparently, but when life gave you incredibly annoying boy wonder celebrities putting them through the juicer was frowned upon.

"Why aren't you in the prefects' carriage?" he asked, and was deeply chagrined when Potter asked the same question at the same time, and in the same tone.

Ginny, who was with Potter, snickered, and Draco noted that despite her superior appearance and intelligence she was still a horrible treacherous Weasley at heart.

"Ron's prefect," she said, glancing at Potter as if afraid that Potter would die from not being

chosen for once in his ever so special life.

Mind you, this time at least he had an excuse. "Weasley?" Draco exclaimed in horror. "Given a position of honour in my school? In my school! Did he bribe Professor McGonagall? Did he offer to give her sexual favours? No, wait, this is Weasley we're talking about here. Did he offer not to give her sexual favours?"

"Go to hell, Malfoy, that's my brother you're talking about," Ginny said, amiably enough but with an edge to her smile that suggested Draco's body could be lying beside the train tracks for days.

"Good Lord, is it? You have so many, it's hard to keep track," Draco returned, and refrained from further insulting clan Weasley. It was too easy, anyway.

"How was your summer?" Ginny asked, relenting.

"Bloody terrible," Draco said shortly. "How was yours?"

"Eh," Ginny replied.

"Bloody terrible," said Potter, as if he had been asked. Draco took another look at him and saw he was looking even more like the surliest gnome in the garden than usual.

He noticed something else after a minute, because he was so used to Potter being at his own eyelevel, but then he recalled he'd been looking forward to lording the Growth Spurt That Finally Came to Daddy over him, and now Potter was taller too. Draco'd known those tales about Potter's family not feeding him were too good to be true.

Draco didn't know why Potter had to suck every drop of joy from Draco's life, but he assumed he did it out of spite.

"Did all those newspapers saying you were insane upset you, you poor little thing?" he asked, making a mock-sympathetic face as he studied Potter over his glasses. "The media can be so harsh." He paused. "Harsh, but fair. I'm glad they've finally caught on: I've been saying you were crazy for years."

Ginny rolled her eyes in Draco's direction, showing the hereditary Weasley lack of appreciation for genius. "I know you two could go on like this all day, but I'd quite like to sit down."

"I will not sit with him!" Draco exclaimed.

"Suit yourself, Malfoy," Potter growled at him. "Afraid I'm going to kill you like they say I killed Cedric?"

Draco stared at Potter's furious green eyes. "Don't be stupid," he said. "I don't want to sit with you because I don't like you. Also you are bad company, and you smell like feet." He paused, letting go of his chest to tilt his glasses and give Potter a proper disdainful look. "Try to resist the urge to over-dramatise yourself," he drawled, and hoped very much that he sounded like Professor Snape.

"I cannot believe you, of all people, just said that."

"I cannot believe that under your totalitarian regime, people are not allowed to talk."

Potter was in a bitch of a mood, Draco noticed. Usually by now he was stalking off in a righteous huff or going for his wand. Much good he'd be fighting Voldemort if all he did was stand about complaining all year.

"I'm walking now," Ginny said in a loud voice. "Anyone who feels like following me can do so."

Draco followed her after a moment because he entirely refused to be left alone with Potter, but the moment cost him dearly because it meant he was trailing behind Ginny and that meant he was actually walking alongside Potter. Oh, the indignity. Someone would see him and his reputation would be ruined.

"I thought you'd be a prefect," Potter said to him, the sullenness in his voice lightened by something like curiosity. Clearly he wanted to mock him about it, clearly he was determined to fill Draco's life with pain to the very brim.

"Fat chance," Draco mumbled. "Madam Pince probably cornered Flitwick in the staff room. She hates me with a dark passion: it's not fair, it's a vendetta."

"Of course you never thought you might just not be good enough."

"Never," said Draco, who had wondered about that for a week after he got Terry's fumbling, apologetic letter. "Why don't you go to hell, Potter?"

"After you," said Potter, and then looked irritably at Draco. "I wasn't - I mean, you can go into the compartment first."

Draco looked at him and then into the compartment where poor, mad Ginny, who had been raised by her family to crave low company, had taken up with Longbottom and Loony Lovegood. The girl needed watching, Draco should not have allowed himself to be temporarily distracted.

"I'm not going in there! That girl's mad. Mad, I tell you. We were up two nights with Anthony persuading him the Snorkacks weren't going to get him. He tried to write home and get his mother to take him away."

Draco had stolen the idiot girl's newspapers in an attempt to cool her fevered imagination. It had not worked.

"What's the girl's name?" asked Potter, eyeing her askance.

"Potter. She's quite friendly with your best friend's sister. She's a school character. People were talking about setting up a school counselor - not before time - just for her last year."

Potter looked honestly bewildered that the world contained anything beyond his own big fat

ego.

Draco gave up and muttered, "Luna Lovegood."

She looked up at him with horrifyingly empty eyes. "Hello, Draco."

"Stop reading your paper upside down," Draco snapped. "You're in Ravenclaw, I know you can read properly."

"You're rather unpleasant," Luna remarked serenely, and returned to her improper reading. Draco was vexed.

"She seems all right to me," Potter said, fighting a smile. How nice, that all Potter demanded of a person was that they summarily judge and dismiss Draco.

Draco looked at him coldly and the smile on Potter's face worked through a series of hesitating lines to become a frown. "Look-"

"I'm not staying here," Draco bit out. "I'm going to find my friends. Maybe I'll leave my chest here-" he deliberately addressed himself to Ginny - "but he is not allowed to touch it."

"Oh no," Potter sneered. "Oh please, Malfoy, let me touch your chest."

Ginny started to laugh. Draco'd been wrong about her for years, a Weasley couldn't change its unsightly orange spots.

Potter went red and started talking to Longbottom about his birthday present, which was apparently a slimy plant. Draco wondered if it had come with a card that said 'I saw this and thought of you.'

He also wondered what the hell Longbottom was playing at, prodding at the filthy thing, and he ducked behind the compartment door just in time. When he peered back out, everyone was covered in slime and Potter was actually spitting it up, which was the best thing Draco had seen all summer.

The best thing he'd seen until the next minute, when Cho popped her head in and said shyly: "Oh... hello, Harry. Um... bad time?"

Potter looked stunned under the slime. "Oh... hi."

"Um, well, I just thought I'd say hello," Cho began, and then Draco stepped out from the shadow of the door.

"Hello," he said.

She blinked up at him, her velvety dark eyes startled.

"Hello Draco, darling, light of my life," Draco prompted her. "You're looking dashing today - how did you manage to become even more filled with masculine allure over the summer?"

She smiled up at him, hesitantly. "Hello, Draco."

He forgot about fathers and prefects and stupid Potter mocking him, because he was able to go up to her and take her hips in his hands, ease her towards him. Her bones felt more fragile against him this year, she seemed smaller and more delicate, and Draco praised the Great Growth Spurt with exceeding praise.

He bent towards her, looking at her lashes flutter, brushing his nose with hers as he caught her mouth, softly at first and then more deeply, taking the moment when her lips shivered open, gathering her to him with a possessive hand on the nape of her neck. She breathed in a little, sharp and sweet, and he felt the warm thrill of being chosen again.

He let their lips part and looked at her, brushed his fingers along her jaw. "Hi there," he murmured, smiling. "Missed you."

She looked around uneasily, at which point he realised he'd made a crashing fool of himself in front of Potter and everybody. He looked around suspiciously, and Ginny and Longbottom were both looking out the window as civilised humans should. Luna was regarding them with bright curiosity, and Potter was staring without blinking, with lips parted and a look of hazy, unfocused yearning.

Draco glared and gathered Cho jealously against his side. Potter could've had any girl at school: Draco did not see why the bastard had to be so set on poaching Draco's one and only.

Potter went red up to his slimy hair and stared at his hands, clenched in his lap. Draco was glad to see he was ashamed of himself, at any rate.

"C'mon," he said to Cho's ruffled black head, and was mildly appalled to hear his voice come out tender. He didn't bother looking back at any of them, and thought he'd trust Ginny with his chest.

Once he was alone in the corridor with Cho, it occurred to him forcibly that they hadn't seen each other in almost three months. She was looking at him uncertainly, as if she wanted to please him but didn't quite recognise him, and his hand left her elbow, hovering, waiting for her permission to settle back.

"You were with your father at the station today," she said.

He snatched away his hand. "Thanks for coming over to say hello."

"My parents say things-" Cho began. "It's just - you can't be in sympathy with him, Draco, he's-"

"He's my father," Draco said, backing against the wall as if she was coming after him. "I won't discuss this."

"Fine," Cho said, looking very offended. "I - I suppose I'll just find my friends, then. Are you coming?"

Draco narrowed his eyes at her. "No. I do have friends of my own, you know. I want to see

them, too."

"Fine," Cho said again, and spun on her heel.

Draco stood alone in the corridor. He wasn't going to go back into the compartment so Potter could laugh at him, and he wasn't going to stand here looking after Cho like an abandoned child, either. He'd thought - he'd thought she would stand up for him to her parents, stand by him like she stood by her friends, but... but they were her parents and she loved them, and she'd been scared when she went home. And she was sixteen, and all bound up in her friends. Draco could see why she might be less loyal to a boyfriend.

They were just a little strange to each other, after the summer. Once they got used to each other again, with Cho away from her parents, everything would be all right.

So he'd wanted her to feel tied to him, as close as she was to her friends. She would in time. They'd be fine.

He found Crabbe and Goyle and was systematically horrible to them until he felt better, and arrived in Hogwarts to find the Sorting Hat was bibbling a new song: Draco listened with half an ear and personally thought he could have written better, but it seemed to reach Potter. Though not in any soothing the heart of the savage beast capacity, it appeared, since he was scowling about the place.

Draco was tired of glancing across the table at Cho and having her fail to meet his eyes, so he got up early from the table and almost walked into Potter, who was storming away from some frightened-looking brats who'd obviously been reading those stupid news stories.

Potter was clearly concerned about this depletion of his fan base, because he looked ready to kill things and Draco was in his path. Which was just Draco's usual luck.

"Heard all that about the houses being friends?" he growled.

Draco was really not in the mood to deal with Potter on top of everything else. He adjusted his glasses to give him a coldly dismissive look, and then pushed past Potter, with intent to sulk.

Potter made a noise like rage, and Draco looked around to see him standing braced, like an animal unsure whether he wanted to attack or just threaten.

"Sometimes I wish you had been Sorted into Slytherin," Potter snarled. "At least then we'd be - something."

"Something you should know, Potter," Draco said. "I wasn't teasing you. I really do think you're mentally unbalanced."

Everyone had become strange over the summer, whether it was shouty and strange, or strange and distant, but Draco had a plan to push Potter down a well as soon as he found a well, and he was hoping he didn't need a plan to win back his girlfriend. He waited a little and then wandered up to her in the courtyard, not making an issue of the fact she had been talking to Potter a second before.

She looked at him and he looked over his glasses and smiled slowly at her, which he remembered she liked.

"Hi," she said, and then: "Ron Weasley accused me of liking the Tornados because they've started winning."

"Don't talk to idiots like that, Cho, they might be catching. The Tornados' rise has been slow and sure, a triumph that has unfolded to all true fans through the years. And Weasley has a stupid face."

Cho smiled a bit. "And the Quibbler said they were cheating, did you see?"

"I don't call blackmail cheating," Draco said thoughtfully. "Cunning stratagem. Good idea. I mean, don't listen to me, Cho, I don't know what I'm saying, I think I may have a slight fever."

"Oh, really?" Cho asked, properly smiling now. She reached up to Draco's secret delight and put her hand briefly on his forehead.

"Really," said Draco. "I feel most unwell. I require nursing back to health. And I think Madam Pomfrey has a spare uniform you can borrow."

At which promising moment Potter intervened to ruin his life.

"Don't you have Potions?" Draco demanded. "Are you too famous to go to class now, or something?"

Cho frowned at him and Potter snapped: "Don't be more stupid than you can help, Malfoy. I'm just going to Potions. Only I saw you two had stopped here, and I just wanted to - um - Ron didn't mean it about the Tornados, Cho, he's just really into Quidditch, so..."

"It's no problem," Cho said warmly. "Who isn't into Quidditch? Does, um, does Ron plan to try out for the Quidditch team this year? He's got a Keeper's build."

Actually, he had the build of an anorexic gorilla, but Draco had made the judicial decision not to get involved in this conversation. He was going to concentrate on the sky and wait until Potter went away and stopped trying to steal his girl. He was painfully aware of the fact that he didn't show his best side around Potter: it was enough that Potter made him look stupid and there seemed to be no help for it. Cho didn't have to see.

"Don't know," Potter returned, and then, probably because his scar hurt if he didn't have all the attention in the world: "Are you going to try out, Malfoy?"

"No," Draco ground out, glaring at him. Potter knew about Draco and Quidditch, he clearly knew...

"What position would you try out for if you were going to?"

"Seeker," Draco answered automatically, from long thought and childish dreams, and then

wanted to bite out his tongue.

Cho was glaring at him again and Potter's eyes were glinting strangely: clearly, because his devilish plan was succeeding, Draco was walking right into the trap, he knew it and he couldn't help himself.

"Why don't you try out, Malfoy?" Potter pursued. "Is it that you're afraid you're not good enough?"

It wasn't that Draco didn't know better, because he did, because most of his brain was engaged in screaming at him to stop at once, to think about Cho and what he could lose, but one wild maddened part of his mind had broken away from the rest and was running the show, screaming 'I am good enough, I am, I'll show you' and before he knew it-

"Go to hell, Potter," he said. "I'm very, very good. You'll see."

"I-" said Potter, and stopped. "I'm really late for Potions," he said. "Uh. Bye, Cho."

He shambled away and Cho's eyes followed him, and Draco was committed to doing something very, very stupid.

It felt even stupider when he was standing in front of Roger Davies clutching a school broom and Davies was giving him a very sceptical look indeed.

"You play Quidditch?"

Draco had a sinking feeling at the disbelief in Davies' voice, and it made him toss his head and sneer harder than usual. "I own Quidditch."

Davies still looked doubtful. If Draco hadn't already told everyone about how he'd cried when Fleur Delacour left him, he would have done it now.

"Right then. Let's see what you can do."

Anger and worry and inadequacy lasted for all of two minutes before Draco kicked off and they fell away, easily as the rest of the world. The wind ran through his hair and he spun as Cho tried to follow him, he felt as if he and broom were the still point of a turning sky, safe here, anchored here and never having to come back down or do anything but win.

Clean and simple, after years of reading and pushing himself harder, everything back in place, as if he was ten years old again and he was going to be in Slytherin and friends with Harry Potter and sometimes Father looked proud of his flying. He banked sharply, bringing it down, and watched Cho careen helplessly through the air on her own momentum with a smirk.

Just having one thing to do, and being able to do it well. The broom turned easy between his thighs, on his side, everything was on his side, and nobody in the world could catch him. He banked again and slammed his shoulder deliberately into Cho's, knocking her away and off balance again, and he looked around for a gleam of gold.

There it was, and it was his. Cho just didn't know it yet.

He dove, in entirely the wrong place, watched her follow him and once she was committed to her dive - she should be more careful, she should always think about every move - he veered left and the beautiful struggling winged thing was pressed tight against his palm.

He came off his broom with a sharp pang of triumph and regret, and Roger Davies came running towards him.

"Draco, you idiot! Why did you never say - look, I'm sure Cho wouldn't mind playing reserve-"

Draco saw the fury flare in Cho's face, but he'd already known what he had to do. He wasn't ten any more, and he'd chosen a different life. "Sorry," he drawled. "I'm a little too busy with my studies to join in your game, but you kids have fun, okay?"

As he turned to the sound of Davies' outraged spluttering, he felt enveloped in a lovely warm glow, like a comfy blanket of supreme victory.

This was more or less immediately cut away by Cho's sharp tones. "I can't believe you did that! It would be all right if you'd wanted to play, but you clearly don't-"

"You don't understand-" Draco began. "I-"

"Did you enjoy making me look like an idiot?"

"I did a little," said Draco, and then stopped in horror.

This was what Terry meant when he went on about Draco thinking before he spoke. Terry just hadn't added 'lest your girlfriend put her broom through your eye in rage.'

Cho looked sorely tempted, but she whirled around to rejoin her team-mates and left Draco to leave the pitch alone, trying to keep the feeling of being safe and free and flying in his mind.

It was well and truly lost when he saw Potter coming towards him from the stands, wearing a garish jumper that abused Draco's eyesight and a funny look on his face. Draco abruptly wanted to commit suicide, but there was only a school broom to hand and they were too horrible and common, he wanted to die with dignity.

"Look at you, Malfoy," said Potter. "You weren't lying. You can fly well."

It suddenly occurred to Draco why Potter's mouth was on the verge of a grin and the urge to suicide swiftly transformed into the urge to kill. "What are you doing up early on a Saturday, Potter? As if I didn't know."

Potter crossed his arms defensively over his chest and Draco saw split skin, half hidden by a sleeve. There were words freshly cut into Potter's hand that said I must not - oh, what did it matter?

"I just thought I'd come see-"

"I know what you thought, Potter," Draco snarled. "Stop trying to sabotage my relationship."

Potter could try all he liked, but even though he always got everything he couldn't have this. Draco could fix this: he and Cho were going to be fine.

They broke up four days later.

She came to him still a little angry, and resentful because she had to cause him pain, and she twisted her hands together and looked up at him with the uncertain gaze that he might one day have loved. She said things about taking time off, and not getting too serious, and perhaps they should, and he realised something he had known all along. Laughing with each other, liking each others' faces and little ways, all of the things that could one day have been something more, were not going to be enough in the face of being fifteen and sixteen in the middle of a war.

He wanted to come out of this with some dignity, but dignity was one of those things he always wanted and which hardly ever happened to him.

When Cho was done she looked at him with pity, and he didn't need pity and he'd make her know it, for a moment all he wanted to do was hurt her for choosing him and then taking it back.

"Will you be all right, Draco?"

He laughed in her face. "I'm all right now. It's a relief, to tell you the truth. You must've noticed you gained a bit of weight over the summer - I certainly did."

Cho stared at him disbelievingly. He would have stared at himself disbelievingly, but he couldn't seem to stop talking.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I hear Potter likes tubby women. They remind him of Weasley's mum, you see."

Of course all he wanted to do after that was apologise to her, but somehow he couldn't, he just stared at her hatefully and she backed away, and said: "Don't you ever talk to me again, Draco Malfoy" and she was crying, but he wasn't allowed to comfort her anymore.

He heard she and Potter had been spotted bonding together in the Owlery together, and supposed she had someone else to comfort her now, or she would soon.

Hermione, instead of ministering to his broken heart in the way a sympathetic woman friend should have done - Draco had vague thoughts about cups of coffee and massages involving scented oil - told Draco he was better off while penning a love note to Viktor Krum, and then descended into an invective against Professor Umbridge.

"I don't know, as Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers go, she isn't so bad," Draco said. "So she's a little theory oriented, that's not as bad as setting pixies on us like Lockhart or casting Imperius on us like Moody. Personally, I'm looking forward to a bit of quiet theory. I think everyone else is too."

"What about all this High Inquisitor business?" Hermione hissed.

"People are saying the Dark Lord has risen, Hermione, in case you hadn't heard. The Ministry's got to do something. This school should be run better anyway, I hope she fires half the staff." Hermione gave him an outraged look and he said defensively: "You know other people's misery makes me feel better!"

"Then you'll really love Umbridge," Hermione snapped. "Did you know she made Harry keep cutting I must not tell lies into his own hand for detention? Do you want a teacher who tortures her students?"

Draco concealed his surprise behind a book. So that was what had happened to Potter's hand. Draco preferred his own guess, which was that Potter had resorted to self-harm in a desperate bid for more attention.

"I don't know, Hermione," he said gravely. "If she promised to only torture Potter, I think I could just about bear it."

"You and Harry may not get on, but that's a terrible thing to say! She did Lee Jordan as well, and I don't know how many others. Besides, the Dark Arts is supposed to be a practical class. She's not a good teacher. You have to know that, Draco."

Well, Draco did know it, but Hermione was not carrying on any campaigns against Professor Trelawney. He quite liked Umbridge. She was dreadful to Potter and had a nasty sense of humour and really, he required no more from a person. Also, he was fairly certain she wasn't a werewolf. He couldn't imagine a werewolf in a frilly floral blouse.

"You're in Ravenclaw and this is our OWLs year," Hermione said quietly. "If someone's not teaching us correctly, if they're interfering with all our classes, you should want to do something about it. Not laugh because people you don't like are getting hurt."

Draco lowered his book slowly, grudging every inch.

"Oh, all right. What did you have in mind?"

She told him. He was appalled.

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He was appalled, but he went down to the Hog's Head anyway, even though it was a low, vulgar establishment that probably had fleas and his mother would be horrified. Hermione could get very emphatic when she was upset, and anyway without him the whole thing would probably descend into raving madness and Potter worship. Those poor little Potter fans were victims of the media and their own feeble minds: they needed Draco's help.

Draco imagined helping the Creeveys by putting them in a sack, in a river and out of their misery. From the looks on their faces when he arrived, they could read his mind.

"You invited Malfoy?" Weasley yelled as Draco made his grand entrance.

"He is one of my best friends, Ron!"

Draco was tempted to add "So there" but contented himself with a sneer and a fastidious shudder at the grim horror of their surroundings. He cast an apologetic look to Terry, Anthony, Crabbe, Goyle and Nott as they came in.

"You invited Slytherins?" Potter demanded.

Because of the poor lighting conditions and Cho's presence, Draco made sure his sneer and glasses look was invested with the maximum possible level of contempt.

"No, that was me," he said. "Oops. So sorry. Was I not supposed to?"

Potter made a terrible noise, like he was trying to snort through his throat. Nobody else seemed to notice how very awful the noise was, so Draco gave him another glasses look which clearly said 'what was that?' and began to settle his people around him. Potter looked embarrassed and Draco was very glad.

He leaned back against a chair, crossed his arms over his chest and prepared to judge everybody.

Weasley's brothers the Sociopath Twins attempted to order Butterbeers for everyone, a devilish ploy Draco saw right through, he'd had all of Ravenclaw trained to refuse anything from the hand of Weasley since second year. He sent Crabbe to get them eight Firewhiskies, and was greatly heartened by the Sociopath Twins looking offended and Weasley looking wistful.

"Terry Boot, you're a prefect," Hermione exclaimed.

Terry put his glass to his mouth to hide his guilty face and mumbled, "It was Draco's idea. It's always Draco's idea," and drank up.

"You're very dear to me," Draco told him, "but you're a complete scaredy cat mother's boy, and I hope you know that."

"My mummy doesn't send me sweets every week," Terry said sotto voce, which meant Draco was engaged in a quiet but furious attempt to stuff Terry's own jumper in his mouth while Potter made some kind of idiot-faced speech.

He would have succeeded, too, if Hermione had not interrupted herself to say - "Because - are you even listening to me, Draco Malfoy - because Lord Voldemort is back."

Terry shuddered at the name and Draco let his jumper go, and reassuringly hit him on the arm. And then, before he could do anything else, something perfectly holy beautiful happened.

Zacharias Smith, who Draco had only known before as some Hufflepuff who was decent at Chasing and who'd been study partners with Terry last year, began questioning Potter. The look on Potter's face was priceless.

Of course, Potter's ego had the resilience of diamond, so he was soon up and running with his wounded hero routine, but Draco dismissed it as dreary rubbish, leaned back further in his chair and studied Smith thoughtfully. Smith had put up a really good fight before he'd let Potter put him down: with work, Draco felt he could have real promise.

His contemplation of Smith was interrupted by Susan Bones and Longbottom and Cho all trying to outdo each other with fulsome tales of Potter's extreme brilliance at flying and evil-defeating and tournament-winning and life.

Draco was aware of how stupid he would look if he started to bicker with Cho over Potter's glory, so he waited until Potter said, "Look, I... I don't want to sound like I'm trying to be modest or anything-"

"You don't sound like you're trying terribly hard," Draco murmured, sweetly and just loud enough for Potter to hear.

Potter stopped and would have stayed stopper if Corner, imbecile that he was, had not started babbling worshipfully about Potter's 'seriously cool flying.'

"Oh my God I know," said Draco. "I am so glad someone started this group, he's needed an official fanclub for years. Tell me, do we get signed autographs with the weekly Potter newsletter? I sure hope so!"

Potter's deeply unconvincing protestation to Corner that he wasn't quite as special as they were all making out, they would have to keep talking to convince him, stopped again, and then Zacharias Smith said: "Are you trying to weasel out of showing us any of this stuff?"

The resulting hysteria at seeing a Hufflepuff daring to question Harry Potter was deeply and wonderfully thrilling. As Potter stared incredulously, Weasley blustered and the Sociopath Twins threatened him with all manner of bodily harm, Draco deliberately moved his chair to the edge of his little group and as close to Smith as he could manage.

"I'm Draco Malfoy," he said.

Smith, who was looking rather beaten down, muttered: "I know who you are."

Draco winked. "Thought you might. Here's another thought: I like your style. Let's be friends."

He held out his hand and, after a moment, Smith reached out and shook it. Draco saw Potter watching the forging of this unholy alliance with narrowed eyes, and he smiled a smile of sweet, all-embracing evil.

Everyone started talking about meeting times and places and Potter being ruler of the universe or something, Cho as energetically as everyone, and Draco felt the warm glow of everyone for once not being on Potter's side fade. Because Cho was on Potter's side, and it made sense, she was scared and he was the big hero who she could count on to live and win, and it made Draco's chest hurt in a way that irritated him.

Then Hermione passed out her little sign-in sheet, saying "If you sign, you're agreeing not to tell Umbridge or anyone else what we're up to."

Smith looked very doubtful.

"If I know my girl, she's put a jinx on that thing," Draco said, not bothering to keep his voice down. "You don't have to sign it."

"If you don't want to sign, Malfoy, you're out," Potter snarled, scrawling his name in horrible undisciplined script like a child's.

Draco sneered and snatched the paper from his hands.

"I'm not going to turn Hermione in, am I? I'll sign it."

Hermione's face softened as he did so and Smith looked persuaded. He took the paper and signed it next, and then everyone signed, with varying levels of enthusiasm. Draco looked around and placed a private bet on Marietta, who looked deeply uncomfortable in this Dark Arts club, as the most likely tattletale. Not that he thought she would tell, not when her best friend was clearly doodling love hearts with 'Cho Chang and the Scruffy Future Leader of Terrified Guerrilla Forces' on her notepaper.

Draco lingered outside the pub afterwards to make sure Cho left with Marietta and not Potter, and felt so pathetic it made his throat hurt as well as his chest.

She left but she'd obviously been trying not to, and he stayed in place and tried to be normal, tried to stop the chest and throat ache, and then went flat against the wall as Potter, Weasley and Hermione came out into the sun, chattering about Ginny and Corner - older news than Cornelius Fudge and Celestina Warbeck if you were a Ravenclaw - and then about Cho.

"She couldn't take her eyes off you, could she?" Hermione said. She sounded disapproving, because she was a loyal friend and Draco was going to buy her presents of appreciation, he was going to buy her all the anthologies she'd ever dreamed of. "You're going to have to decide what to do about that, Harry."

"What's to decide? He fancies her, doesn't he?" asked Weasley. Draco vowed to trip him in the halls tomorrow.

"I think I may have mentioned this before, but Draco is one of my best friends!" Hermione exclaimed. Draco wondered if she would like a pony.

"Well, he's not one of my friends, is he?" Potter asked roughly. "Since he's made it perfectly clear he hates the sight of me."

"Did you hear the little ferret and that wart Smith," Weasley began to grumble, but Draco couldn't have cared less and obviously Potter couldn't have either, because he cut in at once.

"Besides," he said, and cleared his throat. "I really-" and he stopped there because his voice rasped, rough with discomfort even in front of his best friends, and then he went on even with his voice rasping because he couldn't stop. "I liked her and then I saw her, with -

dancing in Hogsmeade and on the train, and I can't stop thinking about it. I think - I really want her."

Hermione's voice went softer, businesslike but with a blanket over it, the same voice she used when she saw Draco really did have a headache. "Harry, I didn't realise..." She stopped and Draco was morally certain she was patting his arm. "I'm sorry, Harry. She obviously likes you, and they've split up: you should do whatever makes you happy."

Draco's hand was in the same painful knot as his throat, and actually he wanted to hit Potter in the face, because everything always did come to pass as Draco feared: Potter was taking Cho after all, and in the end, even Hermione liked Potter better than she liked Draco.

He went home and lay on his bed in the dormitory, and felt betrayed by the world because even Terry was being weird.

"You seemed to be getting on awfully well with Zacharias," Terry said in his weird voice, being strange when all Draco wanted to do was lie there bemoaning the horror of his life and have Terry say soothing things while he did his crossword.

"He seemed cool," Draco said, giving up on woebegone while Terry was preoccupied with being all twitchy. "Don't worry, I'm not going to steal your study partner or anything."

"He's not my study partner anymore," Terry almost snapped, and suddenly it became so clear. Smith and Terry had had one of those tragic studying arguments about flow charts and Venn diagrams in which unforgivable words like 'I never found your notes concise anyway!' were uttered. Terry dropped his eyes under Draco's all-seeing gaze, and then said: "I thought he was a bit like you."

Draco flopped back on the pillows in a tragic way, and said thoughtfully: "I suppose he is rather a handsome devil."

"He's not," said Terry, and paused. "He's very petty. I don't think he cares much about anyone, and he can be really mean-"

Anthony frowned. "So he's exactly like Draco, then?"

"I kill you, Goldstein," said Draco, and made Anthony's bed into an apple-pie bed with him inside it, which was one of his very favourite spells. He turned back to Terry while Anthony was howling in protest and said: "Was he mean to you? Because if so, say the word and he will pay for it."

Terry frowned. "No, he wasn't mean to me."

"Well, then," Draco said, reassured, and shut his eyes and thought about Cho. "If he sticks to being mean to Potter, I think we'll be great friends."

Terry made a small discontent noise, but Terry'd always been a bleeding heart and Draco was fairly sure he thought Potter was quite a decent chap. He had never said so, of course, because Draco would've been forced to injure him, and causing Terry bodily harm hurt Draco's feelings.

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For a while, Draco thought Potter was too busy making eyes at Cho and spazzing out about Umbridge's crack-down on Quidditch to bother with his little gang. Which was fine, it left Draco more time to ponder the great stupidity of women, and the great stupidity of Quidditch, and the great stupidity of everyone in the world but him.

Then Potter gave them directions to some mysterious room, and out of sheer morbid curiosity Draco went along. After all, in a school where lessons attacked you and staircases moved, what could possibly go wrong?

The room being full of books cheered him briefly, but then Potter explained that the room gave you everything you wanted and he had to devote ten minutes into thinking of all the ways Potter had probably created an idyllic loveland for Cho before he tipped off the rest of them.

Potter had Cho, and her smiles and her golden skin, and Draco had a pile of books.

He only perked up a tiny bit when Potter let something slip about the room.

"What did you say the house elves called it?"

"The Come and Go Room," Potter answered, blinking, and then went red when Draco snickered.

He was pleased to see Zacharias Smith snicker too. It further confirmed the impression that Smith was a boy after his own heart.

Kindred spirits were forgotten when Hermione said, "I think we ought to elect a leader."

"Harry's leader," said Cho, staring at Hermione. Draco thought the words 'and king of my heart' were implicit, and the look on her face made his teeth hurt.

"Oh, is he?" Draco asked.

Potter glared at him. "What, d'you want to be leader?" he asked. "What do you want to teach us - the art of note-making, calculated to strike fear into Voldemort's heart? How to look down your nose and over your glasses at the entire world? What do you know, Malfoy?"

Draco folded his arms. "Good question," he said. "Right back at you. What do you know?"

"What do you mean?"

Draco leaned forward and grinned. "Susan," he said. "Didn't you have to introduce yourself to Potter last time we met?"

Susan Bones blinked and ventured a "Yes?" as if introducing herself had direr consequences than she had ever imagined.

"Didn't you think that was a bit odd? You're in class with Potter. Potter, are you too busy thinking about yourself and your shining fame to listen to the roll call? They have it every day!"

"I don't think about my fame," Potter spat.

"Mmm, 'course not," Draco said. He pointed at Nott. "Would you do me a favour? Would you tell me his name?"

Potter looked wildly at Nott, and then at Hermione, who looked embarrassed and wisely did not mouth the answer, because she knew Draco would've shopped her.

"Um," Potter said.

"He's in Slytherin," Draco went on, bright and helpful. "He's been in your Potions class every year for five years."

"Er," said Potter. "Er. Knight?"

"It's Nott."

Potter looked deeply confused. "Uh - what is it then?"

"All hail our leader," Draco announced, and put his head in his hands. "I rest my case."

"Who d'you think should be leader, then?" Potter asked, red as fire but not giving up because he never did and he never would and one day Draco would die of hatred.

"They'll all vote for you," he sneered. "You'll do it. I just wanted to shed some light on the situation. You're not their hero. You're not their saviour. You're some idiot who got lucky and who doesn't even know their names."

"I just want to help," said Potter. "And you just want to pick at me, Malfoy, so why don't you shut up or say something useful for a change!"

Draco shrugged. "Let's vote, then."

He didn't trust himself not to make an idiot of himself in front of Cho. He could feel the last shreds of dignity slipping through his fingers and he hung onto them furiously: it wasn't fair, he'd had a point, he'd be right if this was a normal school and everything wasn't about life or death.

Everyone voted for Potter, even Anthony and Terry (oh they would pay once they were back in the dormitories) except Crabbe and Goyle and of course Draco, who would not have voted for Potter even if it was the only way to keep his hand.

Even Nott voted for Potter, despite Potter not knowing his name. Nott was a soft touch as well, it made Draco sick.

Zacharias Smith looked around, half raised his hand, and then slowly lowered it. Draco was

very proud. Potter was leader by a vast majority, but Draco was still very proud. He leaned over and whispered various suggestions about their club name to Smith, feeling that 'Dolts Anonymous' and 'The Doomed Association' were better choices than Ginny's fatuous 'Dumbledore's Army.' Because they all loved Dumbledore so much, almost as much as they loved sounding like mad extremists. Poor Ginny, she couldn't help it, sometimes her inherent Weasley-ness got the best of her.

Continuing the wonderful Weasley themed evening, the Sociopath Twins tried to hex Smith when he wasn't looking, but Draco gestured to Anthony and both of them cast the same spell the twins had been trying and left them mouthing silent curses.

"What d'you think you're doing?" Potter snapped.

"Saving Smith!"

"I wasn't actually talking to you, Malfoy," Potter said, to Draco's mild surprise.

Draco couldn't actually tell the Sociopath Twins apart, but one half of Frenzied plus Giggling grinned and said: "Sorry, Harry. Couldn't resist."

"Nice leadership skills, Potter," Draco said.

"You're not helping, Malfoy!"

"Sorry, Potter. Couldn't resist."

Draco was turning away and congratulating himself on a small victory when Potter, as he always did, snatched it away from him. He poked Draco in the shoulder with his wand (Assault By Maddened Boy Who Lives! Innocent Victim Crippled For Life! read the newspaper print in Draco's mind) and said: "Nott, you take Neville. Malfoy, c'mon. Let's see what you've got."

And Draco found himself facing down the Boy Who Lived, who spoke to snakes and battled Dark Lords and threw off the Imperius. He just stood there with his stupid hair and his stupid glasses, and he heard Hermione saying as she had once, quietly, in the midst of one of Draco's rants: 'Harry is a great wizard.' Which hadn't been the point at all. Which Draco knew, already, and that was part of the problem: it wasn't fair to have to go to school with a living legend. There was no way to measure up, or prove him wrong when he judged you unworthy.

Not that Draco being out of his league and out of his depth was any reason to give up.

Draco pointed his wand, and then instead of casting a spell he began to speak.

"Just because they're on your side doesn't mean they're funny. People on your side can be evil-minded little gits."

Potter tilted his head, still watching the wand. "You're one to talk about evil-minded little gits."

"At least I know that," Draco said sharply. "At least I don't think I'm always right."

"I know I'm not always right!"

He was still watching Draco's wand. "Have you ever admitted that about anything specific?" Draco inquired. "I heard you're ostracising Finnigan because he didn't believe you a hundred per cent when it's your word against the Minister of Magic's."

"I'm telling the truth," Potter said dangerously, and Draco could hear the simmering anger in his voice. He was aware he could be biting off a lot more than he could chew, but it was that or back down.

"And he's supposed to know that because everyone should know you're always right! Your problem, Potter, is that you're such a precious little hypocrite. You want to be always right, always the good one, and so the people who don't agree with you aren't even people. You're an arrogant, judgemental git."

"You're an arrogant, judgemental git!" said Potter, who had descended to the 'I am rubber you are glue' stage of argument alarmingly fast, and who had just looked away from the wand for a brief instant.

"I'm quite comfortable with that," Draco told him. "You should either accept it or change, but stop strutting about the school acting like-"

"I don't strut," Potter said, and by now he was looking at Draco's face and had apparently forgotten the wand entirely.

"Expelliarmus!"

Draco came so close. So close. Potter only just ducked in time, the spell ruffled his insane hair, but it wasn't good enough and sometimes Draco felt like he tried and tried only in order to be closer to winning and thus even more frustrated.

Potter came up breathing hard. "Very good," he said, as if he was a real teacher, the unspeakable bastard. "You just need to be a little faster." He paused before turning away, studying Draco again (as if that did Draco any good now, the bastarding bastardous bastard) and said: "So that's what annoys you most about me, is it?"

Draco looked at him balefully, and said: "Also your face."

Potter at that point seemed to recall he had other students - only in fifth year and teaching class already, it must be difficult to be so fantastically skilled, poor little thing - and went off to hear Cho tell him how nervous he made her. Draco thought of Cho's smile and her hands and had to close his eyes because he needed the effort he was wasting on vision to fully experience his Potter hatred.

"He gets on my last nerve," said Smith, popping up at Draco's elbow.

Draco gave him a weak, thankful smile. "You are the only bright spot in the bleak horror of these classes."

*

Draco wished other people were less pathetic. He made up a beautifully horrible song about Weasley's Keeper skills and gave it to Crabbe and Goyle to distribute among the Slytherins, only to find that they'd distributed their Potions homework instead.

Then Blaise Zabini failed to goad the Weasley twins to an act of violence, which was a little like failing to turn the sky blue, even though it was clear Umbridge was just dying to kick everyone off the Gryffindor team and see them cry. The state Potter was in these days, Draco bet it wouldn't have taken much to make him lose it either.

Sometimes Draco wished he'd been Sorted into Slytherin so he could've been useful there, instead of being reduced to snatching Loony Lovegood's idiot lion hat off at mealtimes.

Potter beat Slytherin at Quidditch, Oafy Hagrid returned from what had apparently been a holiday at his sadomasochists' club and was overheard muttering about Chimearas to Professor Grubbly-Plank and Cho continued to look lovingly in Potter's direction during DA sessions.

When the last DA meeting before the holidays rolled around, all Draco wanted for Christmas was to go home. His father hadn't abandoned him like Cho had, and any kind of existence without Potter had to be better than this.

Only first he had to listen to Potter yapping about how much they'd improved at jinxes and things, especially sweet little Longbottom, wasn't it darling, he was colouring practically within the lines and everything.

"And you, uh, Theodore, your Impediment jinx is perfect," said Potter, at which Nott beamed and Potter, for some strange reason, looked at Draco.

Was he trying to imply that Draco's Impediment jinx was sub par? That bastard!

Finally it was time to go, and surely this year could hold no worse in store for him than Potter telling everyone maybe they could try Patronuses when they came back, in the tone of one promising children lollipops for being so terribly well-behaved.

"He's ever so gracious, isn't he, almost like an ordinary person," Draco whispered to Smith, nudging him.

Smith grinned. "I feel all privileged just being in the same room as him. Merry Christmas, Draco."

Draco smiled. "Merry Christmas."

Potter caught the smile and it must have led him to think Draco was feeling well-disposed towards the world or something, because he decided to try the patronising act on Draco. "Uh," he said. "Merry Christmas, Malfoy."

Draco brought the smile up a few notches and watched Potter blink at him like the idiot he

was, probably thinking his plan to subjugate the school was working and Draco was falling in line.

Then in a voice of great charm, he said: "I hope mutated holly eats your brains," and left the room.

Even Draco's best ideas always had a fatal flaw, because while he was sweeping out of the room he brilliantly left his wand behind, and had to leave Terry and Anthony to go back and get it. He should've left it there over the holidays.

He would have left it there forever rather than seen what he saw on his re-entry, which was Cho stepping into Potter's embrace, his hand large and sun-browned at the small of her back, drawing her in, and the sheer blinding rage that engulfed Draco when he saw Potter look at him and go red, but not draw back. Potter let Cho kiss him, while Draco was just standing there watching, that complete, utter, irredeemable bastard!

Draco picked up his wand and said loudly, "Don't let me interrupt," and even Cho's horrified face didn't make him feel any better as he slammed out the door.

When Draco got back to the dormitories, Terry took one look at him and said: "Anthony, go down to the kitchens and get the house elves to raid Professor Trelawney's secret stash now. Draco, what happened?"

"Trelawney has a secret stash and nobody told me?" Draco said wanly. "I can trust no-one. This world is an empty bitter place. I saw Cho kissing Potter and I would like to first go blind and then lose my memory and then die, thank you."

"Get the Firewhisky," said Terry.

*

"I'm pretty sure it was their first kiss," Terry said an hour or so later, once Draco was ensconced on the window seat with the Firewhisky bottle cradled to his chest like his alcoholic child.

Draco found this slightly cheering for a moment, since Cho had been eyeing Potter all term and this must mean Potter was terminally bad with women, but then he recalled that despite being awkward around girls Potter was still going out with Draco's girl, and he lapsed back into melancholy.

Terry saw this was doing no good, and tried a different tack. "I never thought she was good enough for you, anyway."

"No!" Anthony said. "Certainly not! I don't know why everyone thinks she's so wonderful and good-looking, anyway."

"I hate you so very much," Draco told him in a dreamy way, and had some more Firewhisky. He felt better, like he was sitting back observing his own sad thoughts instead of actually having to feel sad. Ah, sweet Firewhisky. Terry was so clever, which was why he was in Ravenclaw, where people were clever. When Draco should clearly have been put into an

entirely new house where the only qualification was to always, always lose out to stupid Potter.

"She just wanted a boyfriend," Terry said. "She liked you but I don't think it had to be you. It could've been Cedric."

"The worst part is-" Draco began, and then stopped.

The worst part was that Draco couldn't hate her, as he'd always hated people before when they made him feel small or rejected him. He'd paid attention because he'd wanted to understand her, and now he understood that she was scared and he understood that she'd liked him and he understood why she'd picked Potter.

He wanted to be angry with her but he wasn't really able to, because she had chosen him, once, and nobody had ever really chosen him before.

"Do you want her back?" Terry asked, softly.

Draco thought it over, and thought about what Terry had said about Cho wanting a boyfriend. She'd been willing to consider Potter or Cedric last year. She'd been flattered and pleased and they had been good to each other, and Draco kept thinking about that place on the nape of her neck Potter was probably kissing now, and the way she used to smile at him.

Only Draco didn't want to be the best choice for now. He wanted to be irreplaceable.

"No," he said at last. "But that doesn't make it any better."

If Terry or Anthony had descended to these maudlin levels, Draco would have slapped them, but they both looked at him sympathetically because they were nice people who would never have dreamed of torturing Potter until he begged for mercy.

"It's okay, Draco," Terry told him. "You're just not very good at letting go."

Which was just a stupid thing to say, because why were you supposed to be good at letting go of people you cared about? Why didn't people hang on as hard as they could, prove they weren't letting go, make the other person care?

"I don't want to let go," Draco snarled through the Firewhisky. "I don't understand the concept."

Once most of the Firewhisky was gone, Draco did his favourite impression, that of Potter asking Cho to the Yule Ball.

Anthony frowned. "Is that still funny, now that Potter's-"

Draco cut him off by making an imperious gesture with the Firewhisky bottle. "Wangoballwime will always be funny, Anthony. It will always be funny."

He and Cho might be over, but he still had mockery left.

*

For Christmas Draco got everything he wanted, including a brilliant homework planner from Hermione and Father's approval. Father had actually talked to Professor Snape about Draco and told him Professor Snape predicted great things for him.

Father brought him to the station again, and rested a hand on his shoulder.

"If you happen to have another run-in with Potter," Father said, "-and boys will be boys, won't they? - you might want to mention I spotted his little dog at the start of the year."

Draco thought that mocking people about their pets was scraping the bottom of the barrel a bit, but it seemed to make Father smile. Draco'd known the studying would pay off eventually.

Smith helped continue the New Year in promising style by telling Draco after lunch on the first day that Potter did Remedial Potions.

"You've made me so happy," Draco said. "I think I might cry."

"And he says he can't do the DA tonight," Smith continued, scowling.

"Oh no, what a terrible shame," Draco said. "So happy I really might cry. Just a little. In a manly way."

A few days later, Sirius Black helped break out Aunt Bellatrix and some other people Father said had been convicted without trial in the old days. Anthony seemed upset and that made something in Draco's stomach shift, but - well, if the Dark Lord wasn't doing anything much besides freeing members of Draco's family from durance vile, that wasn't so bad, was it? Father and Mother were both really pleased. No aunt of his was going to hurt Anthony, for heaven's sake.

Terry and Anthony were both very keen to get to the next DA meeting, though, and Draco humoured them because he was looking forward to a nice hour of Potter-mockery with Smith. Potter must know they were his deadly foes, because every time Smith whispered in Draco's ear Draco caught Potter frowning.

"If you don't listen you will not know how to do a Shielding Charm," Potter snapped at him.

Draco adjusted his glasses and gave him a long, wide-eyed stare. "Oh my gosh. Would that mean I'd have to do Remedial Defence Against the Dark Arts? That'd be really embarrassing, that would."

Draco was certain Potter was just concealing his deathly embarrassment really well.

"I'm sure that's it," Smith told him, lingering as Draco took the time to pack his bag into categories according to his study plan. He did not see why more people didn't do this: it was both efficient and aesthetically pleasing.

"I suppose," Draco said disconsolately. "Well, I'd better go off to the library. I swear, if this

whole business doesn't improve my Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL, I shall exact a terrible vengeance."

"You don't need to go yet," Smith urged.

Everyone else had already gone and they were probably getting a head start on studying. This wasn't the kind of sensible talk Draco was used to from Smith. He glanced up inquiringly, and was startled to see that all the books had disappeared from the Come and Go Room.

"What-" he began, and then noticed that Smith was actually standing rather too close to him. Draco took this special moment in his life to feel uncomfortable.

"Let's stay here," Smith went on.

Hufflepuffs had no concept of personal space, that was interesting, Draco thought wildly. It must be a house trait, he would tell Anthony about it for that thesis he was planning, provisionally and saucily titled *The Space Between Helga and Rowena: Closer than Close-*

Draco's thoughts were cut off by Smith taking hold of his shirt.

"What-" Draco began, and then his words were cut off by Smith's mouth.

Draco had no time to recover from the shock of this closer than close Hufflepuff experience of his very own, because at that precise unpropitious moment in Draco's life Potter came in, clearly with a psychic premonition that he could thus make Draco's life even worse.

"Look, Malfoy, I was waiting-" he began, and then though his mouth was still moving, he stopped making any sounds whatsoever.

Smith pushed Draco violently away and yelled: "I'm not gay!"

"What?" exclaimed Draco, who wished his verbal skills would stop failing him in times of crisis.

"I'm so sorry. It's none of my business. I'll go," volunteered Potter, without moving a step away from the scene of Draco's horrible, confusing humiliation.

"You can do what you like," Smith snapped, shoving past Potter as he stormed away. "I'm not staying here with him."

With another mystifyingly venomous glare at Draco, Smith left, though that was no consolation since Potter was still there and still staring. Draco glared at him.

"Right," Potter said. "Uh. I'm really, really sorry," and then fled.

Why did such horrible things happen to Draco, when he was only a mildly bad person? Why did they keep happening?

Now this new year was completely shot as well.

Chapter Five

Draco had always loved the Hogwarts grapevine as a beautifully efficient way to spread awful rumours about Potter, and he could not believe it had turned against him to become a whip in Potter's hands. As soon as he came down for breakfast the next day, leaning on Terry and weary from silent hysteria through the night, everyone giggling at all the tables in school stopped giggling and started looking around innocently.

"What is going on?" he hissed, seizing Anthony's arm as they went to Astronomy class. Terry had already said he hadn't heard anything, and why did Draco ask?

"I respect but do not share your lifestyle choices, Draco, don't grab me!" said Anthony, and then: "I mean, I, ah, haven't heard anything about you, Draco. Not a thing. Not a thing!"

"I will kill Potter," Draco snarled.

"Sorry," Anthony said, "did you say 'kill'?"

"YES," said Draco.

Anthony fumbled for his demon amulet. "That's all right then. For a minute there I thought-"

"I KNOW WHAT YOU THOUGHT," said Draco.

"Good. Good. So it's just Smith and no other boys, is it?"

"I will kill Potter," Draco said.

"Well - er, if you'd caught Potter molesting Smith, you'd have told the whole school, wouldn't you?"

"That's not the point," answered Draco, imagining the glory of putting such a thing in the papers, and then his ears caught up with his fantasising brain. "Molesting - I really am going to kill him!"

"So it's not true, then," Anthony said. Draco looked at Anthony over his glasses and Anthony wilted. "I was just checking!"

Once in Astronomy, Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley moved tables pointedly to get away from Draco. Draco could not understand why they thought they were in danger of lustful assaults when Hogwarts, no matter what its other failings, provided its students with ready access to several mirrors.

In Care of Magical Creatures, Weasley laughed his head off when he saw Draco and Draco was too busy hating Potter to even insult his family. Potter went red with guilt as soon as he set eyes on Draco, and Draco was almost too busy hating Potter to breathe.

"Be my partner," Hermione said, and took his arm. "Draco, I don't believe a word of it."

"I should hope not!"

"I know you'd never sexually assault someone," Hermione said. "And - you didn't use any Dark spells or anything, did you?"

Draco gave her a long look. "I am deeply touched by your limitless faith in me."

"No, of course you didn't, I am sorry. And you aren't-"

"Nothing is true! None of the vile lies being spread about me are true!" shouted Draco, and the rest of the class turned around to give Draco 'wethinks the gay gentleman in back doth protest too much' looks.

He made a sound of hatred and Hermione soothingly did all their work.

At dinner Michael Corner went and ate at the Gryffindor table, where Ginny charmed Draco by telling him off at great length. Draco spent his dinnertime glaring at everyone and plotting to run off to a tropical island, where he and Mother, Father, Terry, Hermione, Anthony, Crabbe and Goyle could all live, and never ever let anyone else come to torment Draco. Particularly Potter.

Once dinner was over, Draco knew everyone would go to the library, so he went to the dormitories and tried to study and enjoy some time without everybody whispering about him. It might've made him pity Potter, if he hadn't hated the filthy little gossip.

He studied by the light of his wand to properly enjoy the dark and woeful atmosphere suitable to his mood, so when Terry loomed out of the darkness hours before the library was due to shut Draco's heart hit the back of his teeth.

Once he had swallowed his heart painfully back to somewhere around the throat region, Draco opened his mouth to tell Terry off and then saw the odd look on his face.

"Ah," Terry said. "I, ah. I heard what everyone's been saying."

The expression on Terry's face was so peculiar Draco was sure for a dry-mouthed moment that Terry believed it all and hated him.

"Of course you didn't assault Smith," Terry said scornfully, and Draco praised the Lord and leaned his forehead against Terry's arm. "He would tell a foul lie like that. He couldn't bear for anyone to find out he likes boys."

"Yes!" Draco said with hysterical relief, clawing at Terry's wrist. Terry ran his fingers soothingly through Draco's hair. "Yes, he, I, Potter saw us, and he lied and besides he-"

"I'm not surprised for a moment," Terry told him slowly. "What does surprise me-"

Clearly, Potter's nasty little gossiping ways had come as a shock to Terry's system. Poor sweet Terry, he was so trusting.

Terry's fingers were slow and careful in his hair. He paused for so long that Draco looked up

at him again, and saw Terry's shadowed face. His eyes were wide and filled with wonder.

"I had no idea that you'd ever," Terry murmured, and the enormity of Terry's mistake made Draco's mind spin out of control.

He had no words, just panic and a frantic urge to tell Terry that this was all Potter's fault, so if Terry could just go and shove this incredibly awkward situation onto Potter, that would be great. Only Terry did not move, he just stood there and looked down at Draco with that wondering tenderness, and Draco tried not to actually have hysterics.

Terry leaned down and the light went dim, blocked out by his anxious face. His lips met Draco's, dry and careful, brushing them, and Draco urgently needed to borrow Anthony's amulet because breathing was too difficult for him to manage on his own.

Then Terry straightened back up, still looking at Draco, and smiled a shy crooked smile that usually made Draco go through anthologies for hours until they had whatever notes Terry wanted.

"So," Terry said softly. "Wangoballwime?"

Draco laughed a little, and the huff of amused breath made breathing come back to him, and with it some desperate way of processing that could pass for now as logical thought. Because Terry was staring at him, wide-eyed and hoping and wondering, and Draco needed answers now.

His head was filling with answers, just not the right ones. He thought he knew the answer to why Terry never dated anyone, why Terry and Smith were no longer, ahem, study partners, why Terry acted weird sometimes. He had all these answers, and he still didn't have the faintest idea what to do.

Only if he did not do something soon, Terry would snatch his hand away from Draco's hair and he would be hurt and Draco would feel awful and irritable and right now he felt more panic at the thought of losing Terry than anything else.

It hadn't been. There had been no instant recoil, with Smith or with Terry, only surprise and confusion, and looking at Terry's face, Draco considered for a spiky, uncertain moment what it might feel like if he was neither surprised nor confused, but giving this new idea a chance.

He didn't come to a decision, because Terry's face changed subtly and he began to pull away and Draco panicked harder and said, "Wait, wait-" and grasped Terry's thin wrist in one hand, stood halfway up and took Terry's face in the other, and brought Terry's mouth to his.

Terry breathed out, a ragged nervous sound, and his lips parted under Draco's. The kiss went deeper, more deliberate, as Draco tried to put what he knew about kissing together with this, with Terry's flat chest hitching nervously against his, his shoulder sharp and pressed against Draco's, almost hurting, rougher than Draco was used to but still very slow and very tentative, since this was Terry.

This was... not bad.

Draco let go of Terry's wrist, and put his hand on Terry's side instead, feeling the rise and fall of his ribs, testing the idea that this could be - what it was becoming, and for once the voice in his head screaming this will be a terrible disaster when he acted on impulse was not swiftly being proven right, for once balance was restored to the universe, or a new balance was achieved. The kiss went deeper, and deeper, and Draco pushed Terry backwards until Terry's back hit the bedpost.

Terry's bed, that comfortable familiar place, and how strange that it too suddenly seemed like an exciting new idea.

Draco's wand, lying fallen on the desk, was their only source of light, and the blue bedclothes looked black with Terry lying on them. His shirt had ended up crumpled and discarded on the pillows, and Draco tried to work out what you did with a boy under you, and settled for stroking the skin of Terry's quivering stomach, following the dark, wiry line of hair until it stopped and left his fingers on the waist of Terry's trousers.

Terry shuddered and looked at Draco. "Draco," he said, sounding awed. "What do you like?"

For another sharp moment of panic Draco wanted to shout that he didn't know, he had no idea what he was doing, wasn't that obvious, and then he looked at Terry's concerned, concentrating face and felt the panic which had kept rising as he kept thinking 'what are you doing? Why are you doing this?' recede because he had an answer, now.

He ran his hand deliberately down Terry's stomach again and murmured, "I like you."

The next morning he was putting on his shirt, not quite sure what to say to Terry, when Anthony opened the curtains and then fumbled for his demon amulet.

"Good Lord, Draco, are you doing the rounds?" he demanded.

"No," Draco said. "No, I'm done," and he looked at Terry, and saw that Terry mostly looked uncertain of Draco's reaction, and not anything else.

Which meant - well, damn Zacharias Smith for making Terry look like that anyway, and Draco reached out and took Terry's hand, lacing the fingers bossily with his own. Terry's palm was damp and his crooked smile was back.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Oh for heaven's sake don't argue with me, Terry Boot, you know that gives me a migraine," Draco commanded, still feeling a little shaken and unsure and so making his voice as autocratic as possible.

"Okay," Terry said, smiling and still looking awed, which Draco found hard to believe even when he was looking at it, because privately he knew he was nothing awe-inspiring.

He was able to pull Terry off the bed using the hand he already had possession of, though, and once Terry was beside him Terry pulled him in, and rested a tentative cheek against his. Draco closed his eyes, and thought that if someone who knew him as well as Terry did still wanted to... this, then somehow everything would be all right.

"Actually this may be no bad thing," Anthony said thoughtfully. "My mum said that the environment of boarding schools is a homoerotic one. Two in one dormitory, that means the rest of us are safe, right?"

"Shut up, Goldstein," Draco said against Terry's hair.

"I'm speaking statistically," Anthony said, sounding injured.

*

The news that Draco Malfoy was going out with Terry Boot was, to Draco's sheer outrage, accepted with a collective sigh of relief by Hogwarts, who had apparently decided Draco was some kind of insatiable predator who, unless provided with a suitable sex toy, was liable to make sudden leaps. Draco suspected Hogwarts was addicted to drama, it had basilisks and tournaments and stupid Potter, his classmates simply were not going to get het up about homosexuality unless people had the decency to spice it up with crazy fictional Hufflepuff assaults.

"The other stuff about Smith still isn't true," Draco informed Hermione grouchyly.

She smiled and dipped her quill in ink. "I'm very pleased, Draco," she said. "I think Terry is a much better choice than Zacharias Smith."

Draco was struck by something. "You don't sound awfully surprised," he noted with dark suspicion.

Hermione looked smug and dropped a single word as neatly as she would have closed a book. "No."

"So you suspected I - how do you know everything, Hermione? How do you always know everything? Why do you study with me if you're an all-knowing super being?"

Hermione patted his arm. "I like the company."

Never let it be said that Draco wasn't easily won by compliments. "Well, I suppose I come as a welcome relief to the rest of your friends."

"Don't start on Harry now, Draco," Hermione said in a pained sort of way. "We have a lot of work to get done tonight."

Draco spared her on the topic of her perfect little friend's inability to keep his trap shut, but only because it was OWLs year. Otherwise his wrath would have overflowed, it was a testament of his devotion to his studies that he contained it and contented himself with being relentlessly horrible to Potter in person, he deserved a prize.

He got one that night when he came back from the library, and found Terry standing about looking shy, and it was so much easier than Draco would ever have thought to slide a hand inside his shirt, curl it around his neck and kiss him into a smile.

The next day Draco had to face Crabbe and Goyle, and in the midst of a horrifically convoluted sentence about the less lying lies that lying Hufflepuffs lied about, Crabbe put a kindly hand on Draco's shoulder and said: "It's okay. Hermione already told us."

Draco almost collapsed with relief.

"She gave us a pamphlet and told us to study it carefully," Goyle said, beaming proudly. "And we are here to tell you-" he fished around in his pocket and produced a crumpled pamphlet, and began to read out loud laboriously - "that we fully support you in what must doubtless be a trying time for you. We only want your happiness and of course an assurance that you and your life partner are engaging in safe-"

"Stop! Stop and never speak again!" Draco commanded.

"Okay," Goyle said amiably. "I like Boot, though. Good choice."

"Would somebody please act a little bit surprised? Just for me?" Draco implored, wringing his hands tragically and dramatically.

"I'm a little surprised about you," Crabbe allowed, because Crabbe was the kind one. "But everyone's known about Boot for years and years. He told us at the Yule Ball when we asked him if the Ravenclaw girls all said no to him."

"You knew? Why did nobody tell me?"

"We thought you knew! Everybody else knew," Goyle informed him. "Really, Draco, you might learn to be a bit more sensitive. Especially given your valid and special lifestyle choice."

That nightmarish conversation aside, and Draco woke up at night with visions of Goyle chasing after him yelling 'Talk to us about your feelings!', things were easier than he would ever have dreamed. If he'd dreamed of things like this, and there seemed no good reason not to've, now.

"I'm still never going to DA meetings again," he informed Terry, two weeks in and able to read in great comfort with his head on Terry's stomach.

"Okay," Terry said amiably.

Draco hoped for a shining moment that he could brainwash Terry with sex into agreeing with everything Draco said, and thus finally have an ally in his great Blackmail Flitwick Into Giving Us the Exam Tips We Deserve scheme, but then Terry went on, sweet and reasonable and crushing Draco's dreams.

"Only I'm sure Potter was just taken-aback, he's not too bad, really-"

"Silence, blasphemer," Draco grumbled, seizing Terry's worn jumper in his hands and fluffing it about as if it was a pillow beneath his head, as a pleasant alternative to listening to the Potter babble.

"Even Zacharias - I don't think he would have been such a prat about it if it hadn't been Potter," Terry said thoughtfully. "He's always had some sort of resentful hero worship thing going on there, and until this year Potter probably didn't know his name, and-"

"Potter doesn't know anyone's name," Draco mumbled, turning into the soft jumper and rubbing the material against his cheek. Then he actually got Terry's drift and squawked his indignation. "No, wait, what are you saying to me? Smith fancies Potter? Smith fancies Potter?"

"Er," Terry said meekly. "I think so, yes."

"And what am I," Draco demanded, full of righteous outrage, "chopped liver? Chopped liver that gets, that gets pounced on because Smith is so hot and bothered after spending an hour in Potter's autocratically unkempt presence anyone will do?"

"Sorry, Draco," Terry said, fighting a smile. "Did you think you were irresistible to all men?"

"Of course not," muttered Draco, who had been rather hoping this was the case.

"Think of it from poor Zacharias' point of view," suggested Terry, who was far too sympathetic for his own good. "There he is, so ashamed of it, with his hopeless crush, and then who out of the whole school has to walk in and catch him at it?"

Quite frankly, Draco did not care about Smith's pain, especially since apparently Draco's first homosexual experience had been more about Potter than it had about Draco, and given that and the fact Potter was seeing Draco's ex-girlfriend, well, Anthony's mum had said boarding school could be an incestuous environment too but this was getting a bit ridiculous.

Not that Draco wanted Smith, the molesting Terry-hurting liar, but it was a little much that Potter had beaten him at something again, and this time Potter definitely hadn't even been trying.

"He's an idiot, anyway," Draco grumbled rebelliously, twining Terry's fingers with his own. "If he likes Potter, why isn't he nice to him? I call it weird. Weird and creepy. Stupid Smith," he went on, his voice dipping lower. "Hate hate hate."

"I-" said Terry, his breath catching as Draco nuzzled his face into Terry's stomach again. "At least he didn't use you for your looks."

Draco slid his face to the strip of skin where Terry's jumper and trousers didn't quite meet, and let his teeth graze the curve of Terry's hip.

His voice came out even lower, soft against his skin. "I have no real problem with being used for my looks."

"Well, that's not what I meant," Terry said, his Arithmancy book sliding out of his hand as he grasped the sheets instead. "I meant - well, I think that's why Zacharias liked me, last year. Because I'm dark and skinny and I wear glasses and - I suppose I have a superficial resemblance to Potter-"

Draco bit down on his hip, and then abruptly sat up, leaned over and held Terry's shoulders back against the bed, hovering over him, mouth an inch away from his.

"Hush," he said firmly. "I will not have anyone saying such atrocious things about my boyfriend."

Terry smiled. They were good together, still friends but more, and life was good again, with Terry, and Umbridge threatening to chuck Hagrid out of school and Draco taking every opportunity to rub this into Potter's tattling face, and no D.A., and more Terry. When Valentine's Day rolled around all the Ravenclaws went down to Hogsmeade as a group, and Terry looked hopeful and so Draco held his hand. Corner looked like he was going to object until Ginny pushed him in the head a couple of times.

"I don't see why you have to keep hurting me," Corner hissed.

Ginny smiled. "I do it out of love, Michael. Out of love."

Rain poured down on Hogwarts that Valentine's Day, leaving Draco soaked and cold and trying to climb bodily inside Terry's clothing and leech warmth from his skin. They all prowled around testing the new Hot Sauce Gobstoppers, and found they did make you warmer but they unfortunately didn't make you any drier. Draco insisted to Terry that this was simply because they weren't eating enough at once.

"Moderation is as bad as a famine!" he shouted, with the water sluicing down his glasses and one arm around Terry's shoulders, one hand under Terry's sodden jumper, and then put five Gobstoppers in his mouth.

He was laughing with his mouth full when they passed Madam Puddifoot's and saw Potter and Cho on the doorstep, bodies stiff with anger and not touching at any point.

"-can't believe you want to go see Hermione Granger on our first date!"

Cho's face looked pinched with fury and Potter looked wretched and uncomfortable, his hair laden with soggy pink confetti. Both their eyes followed the Ravenclaws and Ginny as they went past, and Draco rubbed his nose companionably against Terry's rain-slick cheek, and realised in a startled sort of way that he had by far the better deal.

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"I am really pleased you're getting laid again, Malfoy, it makes you so much less bitter and snarly," was Padma's frankly vulgar and shocking verdict on one Friday night.

Padma was Draco's least favourite Ravenclaw girl, she did nothing but swan around on the arms of Weasleys at balls, and have the bad taste to have an actual twin in Gryffindor. Draco disapproved of twins.

"Don't scowl at me like that, you know we need peace and quiet for our OWLs," Padma went on, and as Draco began to pack books for the library, he'd known trying to study in the common room was stupid, she said very quietly: "We miss you a bit at the DA. You haven't been to a meeting in over a month."

"Well, I'm not going to go to horrible Potter's horrible fanclub when he can't even keep his mouth shut about my love life, am I?" Draco snarled, shouldering his bag.

Before he made his getaway, Padma said casually: "Was it Potter who started all those rumours about you, then? Funny. I thought it was Smith."

Her little comment rankled unsettlingly all the way to the library, bouncing around his head like a roll of parchment not filed away in his bag's class compartments. By the time he was in the library, he was in enough of a state to dump his bag on top of Hermione's notes.

Hermione went from Arithmancy absorption to Arithmancy outrage in a terrifying instant. "Draco, you know better than to do that!"

"Did Potter tell you about Smith kissing me?" he asked in a loud voice. Madam Pince's head went up like a bloodhound catching a scent, and Hermione pulled him hastily into a chair.

"Hush, Draco, for heaven's sake! What are you saying about Harry now - did he know about Zacharias kissing you?"

"He saw us!"

"Well," said Hermione, breathing hard out of her nose. "Well, since he's supposed to be one of my best friends and you're supposed to be one of my best friends, you wouldn't think I'd have to hear it from Parvati Patil, now would you? Honestly, he could have told me-"

"Oh God," Draco exclaimed, and fell forward on the table in an attitude of despair.

Well, that was bloody perfect, now wasn't it? He'd gone and misjudged Potter, and one of the great prides of his life was that Draco always saw Potter with perfect clarity for what he was, unlike the rest of the school. Potter might have seen and judged Draco in a split second, but Draco paid attention and collected evidence about what a prat Potter was, and thus was always right and entirely justified in anything he did.

If he'd known that Potter had forborn from even telling Hermione, he might not have done that impression of Oafy starving to death in the Forbidden Forest once Umbridge chucked him. Wait, no, who was he kidding, that had been a masterpiece, he could never have deprived the world of such hilarity. He might have done it with less malice, though.

"Is that why you wouldn't come to DA meetings? Draco, I think you owe Harry an apology!"

Draco writhed in torment. "I won't, I won't! You can't make me!"

Hermione looked very stern. "The DA means a lot to me, Draco. If you'd told me the real reason you weren't coming, I would have sorted everything out."

Draco opened his mouth to tell her all the reasons why the DA was a horrible little vigilante group and Potter an imbecilic future dictator with a swelled head so bad it probably explained his hair, and then shut his mouth.

"I'll sort everything out," he said at last. "DA meeting Saturday night. We can all..." he forcibly reminded himself that it had been quite nice of Potter not to tell, and utterly loathsome of Smith to do so. "Celebrate Gryffindor beating Hufflepuff at Quidditch," he said finally through his teeth.

Hermione looked very proud of him. Draco resisted the urge to go and wash his mouth out.

Gryffindor did beat Hufflepuff, though not spectacularly. Weasley continued to be frightful at Keeping, which provided Draco with endless amusement, and Potter only just scraped a win by grabbing the Snitch when it appeared for an instant at Kirke's ankle.

Marvellous, Potter had saved the day again, and now Draco had to arrive with a peace offering. Oh, it made him want to die.

He had promised Hermione, though, and he would try to be civil. He put on Muggle clothes as a sort of flag of truce, though stealing Anthony's jeans and 'EXCUSED FROM LIFE' shirt would probably lead to war, breathed out hard through his nose and made a point of entering at a stage in the proceedings late enough to make an entrance, and early enough to be polite. Since that seemed to be his dark fate.

Everyone turned when Draco came in, except Potter who for reasons Draco assumed were connected with his dark fate, was already looking at the door. Everyone put on very, very false expressions of surprise, and Draco glared accusingly at Terry and Hermione, who began a guilty conversation about flow charts.

"Malfoy," said Potter. "Been a long time."

Retorts rushed to Draco's lips and begged to be let out. I'd get my mother to write you a note but you're not a real teacher, Draco thought urgently. Potter, it hasn't been half long enough.

"I'm sure you missed me," Draco said, using the minimum amount of sarcasm he felt necessary to support life. "And since this place has obviously been cold and bleak without my presence, I thought I'd bring a room-warming gift."

He produced same from under his cloak. This was part of the plan he hadn't told Hermione.

"Firewhisky?" Weasley said. "Excellent!" He paused. "You didn't... poison it, did you?" he asked suspiciously.

Draco waggled the bottle and smirked. "Only one way to find out."

"Sorry, you brought alcohol to a place where we're all meant to be learning constant vigilance?" Potter asked.

Draco's mouth opened in soundless indignation and Potter suddenly looked alarmed.

"Um. Malfoy," he said, in a quieter sort of way. "I was teasing you."

Draco raised an eyebrow, but refrained in the interests of peace from a glasses look. "Let you in on a little secret, Potter. You're not very good at it," he said, sitting down - not next to

Potter or anything revolting like that, but not as ostentatiously far away as usual.

"I'll make sure to practise," Potter said dryly.

Draco half-smiled and unscrewed the bottle cap on the Firewhisky. "Now," he said. "Who wants some?"

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Weasleys could not hold their drink. Draco was deeply, deeply unsurprised.

He noted smugly as Ginny Weasley did a slinky dance and Corner looked like the happiest man in the world, that Malfoys handled their drink quite well. He had a bit more practise than the Gryffindors, of course. He was just a little buzzed, the world slightly soft-focus and glowy. This really was an excellent room, not only because of its hilarious alternate name, but because it really did give you what you required.

Music had started about halfway through the bottle, and when it ran alarmingly dry the cabinet appeared and when Draco opened it he found a dazzling array of bottles stretching far inside. And a stepladder.

He rested his hand affectionately on the wooden inside of the wardrobe, and wondered if he dared risk the stepladder. Its edges looked comforting and glowy as well, but something in Draco's brain felt this might not be a good thing.

"Hermione says not to bring out the absinthe," Potter said, stepping hesitantly inside. "Also, um, I don't think you should try getting up on that stepladder."

"You are not the boss of me," Draco informed him, and then remembered he was being civil. "But you could be right," he said, giving the stepladder another look. It waved at him. He did not trust it.

Potter cleared his throat. "Hermione told me," he said abruptly. "That you thought I'd told, but. I didn't tell anyone."

Draco studied the bottles before him. It was a really awe-inspiring selection: he didn't think he could choose. "No," he said absently. "I should've known better. It wasn't really your style, but how was I supposed to know Smith would try to convince the whole school rather than look bad in front of you?"

Potter blinked. "I'm sure that's not what it was about. I hardly know Smith."

That was Potter for you: so self-absorbed he didn't notice half the attention poured all over him. Lucky for him there was so much of it, Draco thought, shaking his head and smirking to himself. Oblivious git. Draco supposed he could thank heaven for the small mercy that Potter wasn't vain as well as arrogant.

"You're not missing out on anything."

"No, I didn't think so," Potter said. He paused for a moment, and then coughed. "The rumours

said that you started it. It - didn't look that way to me."

While an eyewitness report would have been more useful in January, Draco was still pleased: at last, someone who acknowledged that Smith had succumbed to Draco's charms and pounced all on his own.

"Wasn't that way. Smith leaped at me from out of nowhere, it - don't laugh, Potter - it gave me a nasty shock."

Potter of course should not have laughed at Draco's traumatic experience, but Draco was gratified to see that his Face of Leap was just as hilarious as he'd thought it was and Anthony had claimed it wasn't.

Laugh fading on his lips, Potter glanced at Draco and pushed his glasses further up his nose. "But you are, ah. I mean. With Terry Boot."

"Yes, I am ah, with Terry Boot," Draco said, mimicking Potter's inflection and wondering if Potter was a dreadful secret homophobe. "I wasn't ah then. I'd never even thought about ah then."

"But you seem fine with it now," Potter said. "I mean, not that I was-"

There was trifle-flavoured rum on the shelf. Draco marvelled at that and also at the total incoherence of Harry Potter.

He frowned. "What did you expect me to be? Ashamed of him? He's mine. I don't let down people who're - people who I-" He shook his head and reached out for the apricot brandy. Apricots were a pretty colour.

"People like Terry and Anthony and Crabbe and Goyle," Potter said.

Alcohol was nice, Draco thought. It made the hard edges of everything go away, it even made Potter seem like he wasn't judging you every minute, taking the sharpness from his voice to leave it soft and rough.

He smiled. "Yes. Look at you, Potter, you know all their names. Why's that?"

"Because they're your friends," Potter answered.

"Oh," Draco said uncertainly. Possibly his campaign of terror had worked too well and he had made his loved ones targets for Potter's righteous wrath. "What d'you think of vodka?"

"What's it like?" Potter demanded.

"Well, it's a clear sort of alcohol, burns a bit when it goes down, not much taste, we could mix it with pumpkin juice-"

"No, I mean - ah-"

Potter looked red and desperately uncomfortable, his hair practically standing up in clumps in

agitation, and suddenly everything became very clear to Draco. Poor little Potter, his saviour complex had impelled him to have a supportive chat with the member of an oppressed minority group. If only he'd picked Terry, Terry would have been so much better at this, while Draco was desperately fighting off the urge to suggest Potter try it with Smith and watch him swoon with heterosexual horror.

He said lightly, "Come on, Potter. Things can't be going that badly with Cho."

Potter shoved his hands so suddenly into his pockets that Draco thought he was angry, but when he glanced at Potter's face the corner of Potter's mouth came up.

"Care to put money on that?"

Draco thought back to Potter looking like a socially awkward robot in the rain. "No," he said at last. "That's all right. Ah is all right too, by the way," he said, humouring Potter's apparent desire to comfort poor deviant folk such as himself. "Going very nicely. Thank you for the inquiry."

Saint Potter, supporter of house elves and homosexuals and small children who really wanted his autograph everywhere. Draco smiled and tucked a bottle of vermouth into his pocket and thought he might be done here, but stopped for a minute. The civility hadn't been quite as painful as expected, though that was probably because of the alcohol and the dim light in the cabinet, which let Draco pretend that this wasn't Potter, or at least that they weren't what they were to each other in the clear light of day - a thing of torment and a chore forever.

"So you don't - miss anything about girls?" Potter asked quickly, and Draco couldn't go before he answered the question, but he looked back at the shelves rather than look at Potter.

"I mostly miss talking about Quidditch."

Because alcohol was so nice, and made everything in the world nice too, he thought he would take just one more bottle. This turned out to be a mistake when he reached up for it and almost overbalanced.

Potter caught his elbow at once, steadying him, his grip surprisingly strong around Draco's arm.

"I," said Potter. "You're drunk, aren't you?"

"Certainly not," Draco replied with hauteur. "Ravenclaws never get drunk. Ravenclaws become inebriated."

Potter laughed, a low sound against Draco's ear which reminded Draco rather forcibly that Potter had not stepped back and that Muggle clothing was upsetting because it exposed things like elbows and you ended up having all kinds of weird skin contact with the oddest people.

"Are you drunk?" Draco asked, with a measure of self-preservation.

"No, I haven't touched the stuff," Potter said, his voice going darker now as well as lower. Draco looked at him and he looked angry: he said slowly, "I'm not keen on not being in

control of my own mind - especially lately."

Whatever was making Potter look so homicidally upset, Draco wanted no part of it, but what with this being a cabinet and Potter still holding onto his elbow, there was nowhere to go.

"I do not have the faintest idea what you're talking about," he said, very sharply, because it seemed like a clever idea to be aggressive with the insane boy. He turned away from the bottles and glared: Potter blinked, his face too close for Draco actually to tell whether he looked murderous and enraged.

"Course you don't," Potter said roughly. "Look, d'you remember last year and the truce in the library?"

"Yes," Draco answered, and then hurriedly and in a much more normal voice: "It wasn't a truce, it was me talking to you because you were annoying every hour at five minutes to and ten minutes to on Friday-"

"Because I'm especially annoying on Fridays. I remember," Potter told him. "I want - I think we should have another truce, for - for the good of the DA and everything. Because - it's important and - Crabbe's really getting better at jinxes and-"

"I don't know, Potter," Draco said, a bit wildly. "Are we going to have any DA meetings on a Friday?"

Possibly he was consenting to something without his consent, because Potter looked triumphant for a moment and Draco wasn't sure what he was even triumphant about.

"Not if you don't want to."

"Draco, are you trying to get all the drink out of that cabinet?" asked Anthony, opening the door wider. Draco blinked in the light and Potter, not before time, snatched his hand away from Draco's arm. "I - oh, hi, Harry. Draco, you don't want to miss this, Ginny Weasley has her top off!"

"No!" Draco said. "Really? Excellent!"

He leaned over to where Anthony stood, both for comforting Ravenclawyness and to get a proper look at Ginny. She was in a bra and singing a song about how her cauldron was full of hot, strong love.

Anthony and Draco gave consideration to this sight. As a Ravenclaw, Draco felt bound to analyse it thoroughly.

"Where's Ron? And I thought you were gay!" exclaimed Potter, who could apparently say the word after all and was pink to the tips of his ears.

"I'm equal opportunities," Draco said happily, the alcohol still making him feel at peace with all the world. "If any boys want to take off their tops, I'll be very interested to see that."

"Interesting you should say that," Anthony remarked, and threw back the cabinet door all the

way.

Ron Weasley, who should never be permitted around Firewhisky again, had his top off and was twirling it around his obscenely red head.

"OH I MAY NOT BE A WHIZ ON THE QUIDDITCH PITCH," he sang at the top of his lungs, "BUT I'M CHASED OVER TOWN BY EVERY WITCH-"

"Oh my God, I take it all back, so many freckles, I can't think," Draco murmured in delirious horror. "Someone make him put them away."

"WHO KNOWS THAT I'M A LEGEND IN THE CHANGING ROOM," Weasley bellowed. "BECAUSE BABY I'VE GOT AN ENORMOUS BR-"

"Ron!" Hermione shrieked commandingly. "What would your mother say?"

"I should go help," muttered Potter, though whether he meant stop Weasley or stop Hermione from killing Weasley was unclear. He brushed by Draco as he went out.

Draco began to share the apricot brandy with Anthony, who giggled at him and said: "Mum would so not approve."

People were dancing, though aside from the Weasleys they were doing so while decently clad. Hermione and Potter were wrestling Weasley's top back on, to Draco's immense and abject relief.

The Sociopath Twins, typically, were shouting: "Shame!" and "Take it off again, Ron, baby!"

It was a good party, Draco thought with immense blurry self-satisfaction, and then saw Zacharias Smith, recently beaten at Quidditch, lurking about the outskirts of the party like a hungry hyena. Draco saw the way he was glancing sidelong at Potter, and felt a sudden pang of fellow feeling. He knew what it was like to be ignored and furious, after all.

It didn't mean he would betray one of his friends, though.

When Hermione was done wrestling Ron into submission - which Draco was privately and horrifyingly convinced she enjoyed on some unspeakable level - Draco went up to her and slid his arms around her waist, felt the crisp cloth of her blouse against his arms and the press of her bushy hair. Alcohol was nice, he wished she would have some.

"Come on, dance with me."

"You're behaving appallingly," she said in her prim tones. "I cannot believe there are drunken prefects about me, this is all your fault."

"I know how you hate breaking the rules."

Hermione faltered and then smiled, because she hadn't been friends with Draco for years without learning someone was going to call her on everything, and she might as well relax about it.

"I'll dance with you," she said at last.

"Course you will," Draco said comfortably. "You're my girl, aren't you?"

She put her arms around his neck and they were comfortable together, with nothing confusing going on about this, not like there sometimes was with Terry now, with all this new boundary-shifting and second-guessing.

"Only if you'll be good," Hermione said, and Draco was possessed with a sudden fear that she meant it. He held on hard to her stupid blouse through the dance, and tried not to think about choices.

Several rounds of apricot brandy later, Anthony stole his glasses and pranced about the place like a demented house elf, cackling and saying he couldn't wait to tell his mother that he was the cleverest of them all. Draco felt that though the alcohol prize went to the Weasleys, the Ravenclaws were not covering themselves with glory tonight.

He caught Terry as he went by, fingers light but moving with intent inside his shirt and up his collarbone, and then just before he pulled Terry into him he had a horrible, terrible moment of doubt. Because Anthony had taken his glasses and Draco was very - inebriated, and all he could see against the light was dark hair and glasses.

He hesitated and was amazingly relieved when Terry let out his familiar and dear nervous laugh. "Where've you been all night? Looking for someone else?"

He brought Terry into focus, always-worried hazel eyes and Draco's fingers slipping into curly hair.

"No," he murmured. "I've got the right one," and when Terry sat down rather abruptly Draco crawled into his lap.

He woke up the next morning tangled with Terry and the sheets, a monster trying to break free from the fragile eggshell of his skull. Anthony was moaning from the next bed for them to get his mother and tell her he wanted to die.

"I am an unspeakable thing," Draco said, burying his face against Terry's narrow chest.

"No, no," Terry said soothingly. "You gave it a good school try, but I didn't let you commit public indecencies on a chair. It's all right."

"It's not," Draco declared. "It never will be. I was polite to Potter. We had a whole conversation."

"Uh - there, there?"

"I think," Draco opined darkly, "that he's trying to recruit me for the side of light. I will never drink again."

"Er," quavered Ginny from behind the curtains of Corner's bed. "Er. Has anyone seen my

top? Recently?"

Corner seemed to be in an alcoholic coma, so they found Ginny one of Terry's jumpers and Draco put on yesterday's Muggle clothes and volunteered to walk her to her own tower because he had been raised correctly and he wanted to see Weasley's face.

Unfortunately, once they were there Weasley was too busy yelping in distress at Hermione and Potter to notice Ginny at all. "Why do you keep smiling, Harry? What did I do? What happened last night?"

Ginny escaped thankfully up the stairs and Draco made his way out of the Gryffindor common room, feeling duty bound to say over his shoulder: "Weasley, baby, you know how to shake it."

Weasley went pale. "Shake - shake what? What? Why will no-one tell me?"

"You wild thing," Draco added with cheerful cruelty.

Potter looked up, caught his eye and raised his hand in an awkward sort of greeting, as if not being hostile used up all of his pitifully few social graces. Draco removed his hand from his neck, feeling his rather self-conscious attempt to conceal a love bite was doomed to failure anyway, and waved back a tiny bit. Potter's mouth quirked and, deeply nonplussed, Draco smiled too.

Going back up to bed and Terry, he caught sight of himself in a mirror and stopped in mild horror. His hair was not, as he'd fondly hoped, rakishly dishevelled, his Muggle clothes looked silly with his Ravenclaw scarf and his glasses were smudgy. He had a sudden feeling, as if Father was looking over his shoulder, that this was not how he'd meant to end up.

He smiled and looked over his glasses at his reflection, and felt like he might not care.

Until Monday came, and with it the March Quibbler in which Harry Potter named his father and Crabbe's father and Goyle's father as Death Eaters.

Draco read it and shook with fury, while the whole table was buzzing with excitement that slowly, as they looked at him, began to die down. Terry touched his arm but when Draco got up and went over to Crabbe and Goyle, he didn't try to stop him.

Crabbe and Goyle met his eyes with grim understanding, and all he could think of was that he and Father had been better recently, that Father was a politician and had worked for years doing damage control, claiming Imperius, he told Draco he'd never reach the position he deserved because of people's prejudices. What was this going to do to him? Why should some stupid boy be allowed to wreck his father's reputation?

He saw Potter and Hermione laughing about it in the library and saw a very intense shade of red.

"The best bit," Hermione began gleefully, but he never heard what the best bit was because he strode up to their desk and threw the stupid Quibbler in Potter's stupid, startled face.

"You can take this rag and choke on it," he snarled. "If it doesn't kill you, try choking on your stupid DA. You don't think any of us will be back after you badmouthed our fathers, do you?"

Potter went white and stormy looking. "It doesn't matter to you that it's the truth, then?"

It had been the truth when Potter had run around the school spouting it and Dumbledore had supported him: everyone had known what he thought and made up their own minds. Truth didn't need dramatic airings in newspapers, especially not when it was about Father, especially not when it could wreck his career.

"Oh, we've only got your word for that," Draco spat. "It didn't occur to you that my father is a politician and relies on his reputation, did it?"

"No, but I can't say it would have stopped me," Potter sneered. "He's no great loss to a system of truth and justice. He's no great loss to anyone."

"He's my father!" Draco said. "And none of the people you've slandered will have any choice now but to - to -"

"You don't honestly believe he hasn't made his choice already!" Potter shouted, standing up. "What about you, Malfoy? Why don't you pick a side?"

Draco stepped up to him, close as the desk between them would allow, and shoved him backwards.

"Fine," he said coldly. "Any side but yours."

Chapter Six

Terry didn't talk about the Quibbler interview. Draco supposed it was reassurance, that Terry didn't want to hear anything about Draco's father that would make him change his mind about Draco, but Draco might have preferred some shouting and arguing and an open assurance that nothing would make him change his mind about Draco.

He had no right to expect that kind of assurance, though. It wasn't like Terry had chosen him, not really, not when the other options were Zacharias Smith and celibacy. He and Terry were friends and Draco didn't believe it was a matter of convenience or anything, but there was no evidence that Terry would have chosen him from all the world, let alone wanted him enough to keep choosing him, no matter how inconvenient it might become.

Those were uneasy thoughts that stirred only briefly, on nights dark enough to seem lonely despite all the others in the room or when everyone else was at the DA and April kept making the skies open and weep. Even the fact Dumbledore had hired a teacher more horse than man hardly cheered Draco up on those days, since there was nobody to see his 'classroom complete with trough' routine.

Even Hermione was too busy for the library some days - probably off planning her next expose on Draco's father - and one day, on his way back from the library, he ran into Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini and that girl Pansy Parkinson. They were laughing and called him over.

"Some girl called Marietta told us Dumbledore had organised a secret army of students and we got to chase them down!" Zabini exclaimed. Draco raised his eyebrows at Crabbe and Goyle inquiringly, and they shrugged. Zabini, still beaming uncharacteristically, said: "We got fifty points for Slytherin!"

Draco shifted his heavy bag from one shoulder to the other. "Congratulations."

"They say they're going to expel Potter!"

Draco smiled properly then. "Not before time, if you ask me."

"Come down to our common room," Pansy said. "We know where Trelawney keeps her stash."

"What a coincidence," Draco told her. "So do I."

Potter was unfortunately not expelled, which relieved Draco's mind a bit because he hadn't seen how Hermione would escape the same fate, but somehow Umbridge managed to get Dumbledore not only fired but on the run from the law. Draco thought he might've misjudged Umbridge - she wasn't much of a teacher, but clearly she was brilliant at administration. Anyone would be an improvement on Dumbledore, and there might be some order in Hogwarts now.

Draco was in quite a good mood all that day, until the next morning when they all made a trip to the infirmary, and he saw Marietta's face, and realised Hermione - his Hermione - had actually cursed someone to be scarred for life if they spilled the beans about her precious little club.

"How can you even think about that when Dumbledore's gone?" Hermione demanded later, in a fraught whisper. "I wanted to keep us all safe! I thought it was a brilliant idea-"

"Yes, brilliant," Draco said coldly. "Shame you didn't just put the mark on her arm where it'd be less conspicuous, though. Otherwise there isn't much to choose between you and the Dark Lord."

Hermione stood up and looked older, suddenly, old enough so Draco was aware of a cold space between them. "I'm sorry you think that," she said. "But you have to take harsh measures in a war, Draco. This is life or death."

"Marietta didn't think she was in a war," Draco snapped. "Marietta thought she was at school!"

Hermione stared at him and then, looking furious with him and herself, began to cry, and even though she'd attacked one of his house, he didn't - he wasn't all right with seeing Hermione cry. He hissed exasperatedly between his teeth and then sat back down beside her, at the table where all their books were fallen and chaotic, and leaned his forehead against her angry hunched back as she cried.

He thought about his father saying, They're not stable, Draco. You can't trust them.

"Miss Parkinson says that you seem to have a very sensible attitude to all of this upheaval," Professor Umbridge told him after Defence Against the Dark Arts. "Change is difficult, but things do have to change in order to get better, and in trying circumstances, well - the stronger characters prove themselves."

"And those of weak mind get run off by the law," Draco said, still lost in happy thoughts about never having to listen to Dumbledore's end of year speeches again.

Professor Umbridge smiled girlishly, as if they were sharing a confidence. "Exactly. Draco, I think you would be perfect for a little scheme I'm setting up."

Which meant that Draco was chosen by the new Headmistress, who no matter how absurd her taste in clothing seemed to be an excellent judge of character, to be part of the Inquisitorial Squad. It was better than being a prefect, Father wrote. He was really proud. And that meant Father was in favour of the Ministry, too, it meant Draco didn't have to choose between extremist individuals like Dumbledore and the Dark Lord.

"We're a select group supportive of the Ministry of Magic, hand-picked by Professor Umbridge," he drawled when he came upon one of their little insurrectionist groups, willing Hermione at least to understand that this was the intelligent choice.

Hermione looked at him with her mouth set, and Potter stared at him as if he'd betrayed him. As if Draco had ever been on his side.

"You like that power-mad, crazy old bat?" he demanded.

"Good Lord," Draco said. "Have I been misinformed? I thought Dumbledore had left

Hogwarts. That's five points for denigrating our new headmistress, Potter."

"You can't do that!" exclaimed Ernie Macmillan, the cheeky bastard.

Nice to have some power for a change. "I believe I can," Draco answered. "Five points for contradicting me, Macmillan. Weasley, your shirt's untucked, either lose five points or give us all another show."

Weasley went for his wand and Hermione grabbed his arm, saying: "Don't" in a subdued voice, and Draco smiled at her.

"Five points to Gryffindor for being the only one with any brains."

Hermione looked at the floor. "I don't want them," she said. "Draco. You're making a terrible mistake."

He stared at her bowed head and she kept staring at the floor, and Potter stopped staring at Draco long enough to check the house hourglasses in the wall.

"Noticed, have you?" said the Sociopath Twins as they strolled up.

Potter didn't glance at them, turning from the hourglasses back to his intent gaze on Draco. "Malfoy here just docked us all points."

"Montague tried to do us during break," a Sociopath Twin said, his voice very ugly. "Best not to tell you what we did to him, with one of Umbridge's little sneaks around."

"Montague hasn't been seen since break!" Draco exclaimed. "What did you do, kill him and hide him away because anyone who took house points from Gryffindor doesn't deserve to live? Yeah, Hermione, I can see you're right, I should be aligning myself with lunatics and murderers!"

The Sociopath Twins stepped forward as one, which was when Draco realised his fury had led him to be very, very unwise indeed.

"Leave him alone," Potter said unexpectedly, shoving his shoulder hard in front of Draco's. "I'm sure they didn't do anything too bad to Montague," he went on to Draco, his words tumbling hard against each other. "Even if they did, it's more trouble for Umbridge, isn't it?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Oh, that's perfectly all right then. I'm so glad that just because you think you're right, everything you do is justified!"

"I swear to God, Malfoy, you have to listen to me!" Potter said. "You're aligning yourself with lunatics and murderers now! You know better than this!"

Possibly one of the reasons Potter was so unbelievably arrogant was that he had some sort of trick that made the rest of the world fall away into unimportance, even the imminent threat to Draco's life posed by the Sociopath Twins, in comparison with the desire to hit Potter very, very hard.

He tilted his head and Potter followed the motion. "Maybe I'm bringing the system down from the inside, Potter," Draco said. "Five points for not thinking of that."

"Are - are you?"

"Maybe I am," Draco drawled, and he was so sick and tired of Potter (and the universe) measuring him and finding him wanting. "Maybe I'm not." He stepped back sharply, and said: "Five points because I don't like you, Potter," and walked away.

*

The next day he found Cho crying in the common room and felt that old urge - it seemed very old now - to put his arm around her and keep her safe. Instead he leaned his arm against the mantelpiece and asked her distantly what was wrong.

"I broke up with Harry," she said. "I think. If it could be called breaking up, I don't know, we only ever kissed once and - I couldn't. Marietta's face, and he defended Hermione Granger."

"She meant it for the best," Draco found himself saying.

This did nothing to stop Cho's tears, and so Draco stopped talking, because Terry had told him sometimes when he talked things just got progressively and unbelievably worse. He stood there at the mantelpiece and waited until she was done crying.

At last, Cho said: "I don't think he even noticed we were breaking up," and Draco, carefully so as not to cheat on Terry, touched her shoulder.

"I think you did the right thing," he said, and then left her in a hurry to go tell Terry not to be jealous, was he jealous?

"Madly jealous," Terry said, his eyes small with amusement even though he wasn't smiling, and Draco sat down beside him and dropped a kiss on his neck.

"I'm glad you don't have to go rushing off to that idiot DA anymore," he whispered.

"I don't want to talk about it," Terry said at once, and Draco told himself that was because he was scared of losing Draco, and that it was stupid to expect Terry to hold on too ridiculously hard, to refuse to countenance the possibility of ever losing Draco.

He leaned against Terry's side, taking comfort in his warmth and the arm that slipped readily about his shoulders, and began to read a letter from his father.

Having Cho and Marietta distraught in the common room was no good if you urgently needed to study for OWLs, and of course studying for the OWLs was so vital Draco did not even consider going home for the Easter holidays.

Fat chance anyone had of studying when Harry Potter was traipsing around the library like a discomfited gremlin. Draco wished they had some moors around so Potter could go wail on them and satisfy his melodramatic instincts, instead of badly startling people who were merely in search of helpful indexes and not expecting Potter to loom out of nowhere.

"I'm sorry," Draco said pleasantly. "I don't know where the Little Harry Learns To Read books are."

"Do you love your father?" was Potter's idea of a reasonable conversation opener.

"What are you planning to do to him?" Draco snapped.

"No, I mean - if you found out he did something awful."

"What's he going to do?" Draco asked, trying to keep the thin edge of panic out of his voice.

"No, it's just - Malfoy, you have the worst father I know, and I just wanted to know if - if you loved him. If you'd love him no matter what you found out about him, what he did when he was younger, or-"

"Yes!" Draco exclaimed. "Yes! All right! Have you rubbed it in sufficiently? Do you feel better now? Do you want to hear it again? Yes."

Potter looked a little startled to be backed up against a bookshelf by the sheer power of Draco's rage, but he also looked a little less angry. "I feel a bit better," he said, quietly.

Draco threw up his hands and stalked away. He wondered if Potter wrote 'Lucius Malfoy was a Death Eater' all over the walls in Gryffindor tower, did he have nothing else to think of? What had got his mind on fathers in the first place?

He sat down and tried to stop simmering and start studying, only to see Potter not so very far away, engaging in a spot of illegal chocolate and conversation with Ginny. Really, the girl had been on the receiving end of some Ravenclaw love, how was she still Potter's enthralled slave?

"It's not Cho I want to talk to," Potter grumbled through his chocolate and his very sad and angry face.

"Please talk to someone," Ginny said. "I know something's bothering you, you haven't even let us talk to you about Dad, all you do is look confused or angry all the time and-"

"I'm not confused about ANYTHING," Potter snarled at her. "And you'd be angry too if Voldemort was possessing you and you had to watch-"

Draco picked up his Arithmancy textbook and hurled it viciously at Potter's head. Everyone in the library looked up.

"SHUT UP," said Draco. "I DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR PAIN."

He stood up, picked up another book and threw it. This time Ginny had to dodge out of the way, for which Draco was a little sorry but too angry to apologise.

"Nobody here cares about your pain!" he shouted, throwing the third book. "We just want to read! AND ALL THIS SHOUTING IS NOT CONDUCTIVE TO A LEARNING

ATMOSPHERE!"

He paused, wondering how best to achieve a killing throw with an encyclopaedia and whether it would pass as an accident, and then said: "Also unless you are experiencing regular amnesia, nobody is possessing you, you melodramatic twit. And even if you are I'd put it down to psychosis. Don't you read?"

At that point nobody was allowed to read, because Madam Pince threw them out of the library and gave Draco a look which indicated that she did not know until she met him how full of hate her world could be .

Potter was blinking at Draco like a man dazed. Draco wondered how hard he'd thrown those books, and hoped the brain damage would be permanent. "Really?" he said.

"Yes, really," Ginny told him, rolling her eyes. "I was about to tell you so myself, before this one went all Ravenclaw on a Rampage."

Draco made a noise of despair and rage, and stalked off. As he went, he heard Ginny say tentatively: "Is there anyone you would like to talk to?"

*

Draco wished the world would stop consistently spiralling out of control and comprehension. He would have thought the Sociopath Twins quitting school (and showing the world what value Gryffindors placed on traditional schooling) would have made things better, but it seemed to have given everyone ideas.

Montague was found, half-starved and disoriented, and the Inquisitorial Squad wanted blood. The rest of the school were taking Filch and Umbridge far too seriously, and everyone was walking warily. Ravenclaw was the quietest house, because nobody was going to attack Draco, and Draco certainly wasn't going to attack any of his housemates, even if he felt like punishing the world when Pansy Parkinson spent all night weeping because she had horns, and Goyle spent all night telling her she was pretty anyway.

Draco gritted his teeth and told himself that once the final match of the year, Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw (his house versus Potter's) was over with, the worst would be over with as well. He'd have loved to think Ravenclaw would win resoundingly, but no matter how much Weasley messed up, Cho was not going to get to the Snitch before Potter.

That match was worse than he had ever dreamed.

Draco sat in the stands, disbelieving, clawing at Terry's shoulder and begging him to say it was all a nightmare, as Weasley made save after spectacular save. He looked for Hermione's face, thinking her wrongheaded happiness might console him a bit, but she was mysteriously absent and the whole world was a bleak, barren, disgusting wilderness of Weasley triumph.

By the time Potter got the Snitch from right under Cho's nose, Gryffindor had beat Ravenclaw by the largest margin ever seen in a school Quidditch game, and Draco didn't actually trust himself not to turn on people and rend them. He stalked off, away from Terry, to the fields past the pitch and with some vague notion that he'd like to find something in the

Forbidden Forest and kick it to death.

"Malfoy!"

And to top this most perfect of all perfectly awful days, there was Potter. Draco wheeled around and saw him coming across the grass, panting, still clutching the Snitch and wearing his horrible sweaty Quidditch robes, with his hair not just wild but actually savage from the wind.

"In what way," Draco asked furiously, "do you want to make my life unbearable today?"

"So you haven't cooled off, then," said Potter, at his most redundant. "Look, I just wanted to talk, I've only ever wanted to talk to-"

Which was the biggest lie Draco had ever heard, because all Potter had wanted him to do when Draco was trying to be friends was curl up and die. Of course, he would be gracious now, since he was the big winner at Quidditch and everyone loved him in spite of his rage fits, he might condescend because after all, Draco wasn't in Slytherin.

"How's your little dog, Potter?" he asked suddenly, and the sudden fear on Potter's face made him breathless with triumph.

It wasn't a dog, not if Potter looked like that about it. It must be a person.

"My father saw your dog at the start of school - careless, were we? My father knows all about it," he went on.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Potter said unevenly, his chest rising and falling hard.

Draco didn't, really, but he was enjoying himself all the same. "Maybe," he suggested, "my father could help have it put down."

He realised he had gone too far when Potter roared and charged at him, the world suddenly and terrifyingly went flying out from underneath him, and Draco's head hit the earth and Potter's fist hit Draco's stomach at approximately the same sickening time.

The bastard was hitting him with a fist that still had the Snitch in it. Draco yelled his rage and struck out, wildly, wishing he'd spent more time flying or doing anything but sitting in the library getting soft because the only thing that mattered was causing Potter a lot of pain right away - and perhaps, the cowardly part of his mind added, not getting his nose broken. He twisted underneath Potter, scrabbled at his stupid robes, lost his glasses as he tried to tumble Potter over and didn't manage more than getting a grunt of pain. There was still roaring and victory songs for Weasley going on somewhere in the distance but Draco didn't care, didn't care, he grabbed hold of the front of Potter's robes and pulled him down, trying to co-ordinate strangling him and getting him off, and then Potter made an urgent sort of sound in his throat, and Draco made the bad mistake of going still for an instant.

Potter's hands, still almost in fists but not quite, went to Draco's face, touching carefully for a moment as if Potter were blind. Draco thought confusedly that that must be it, since Potter

had lost his glasses too, but then Potter cupped Draco's face roughly in one palm and kissed him. Draco's blood was still roaring with adrenaline and Potter kissed hard, like he was angry and confused and desperate, his face a close, blurring vision of black lashes against heated skin, and Draco raged and fisted a hand in Potter's hair and kissed him back. Potter's mouth opened hot and demanding against Draco's, teeth cutting into his lip, Potter braced and shuddering over him, and Draco pulled his hair and made a demanding sound of his own, and when he heard it Potter moaned.

Draco arched up and Potter's hands were all over him as if arching was permission, under his shirt, large hands sliding up his back as if in an attempt to touch every inch of Draco he could reach. Draco felt Potter's fist curl empty against the small of his back before he felt the fluttering at the nape of his neck and realised Potter had let the Snitch go up Draco's shirt.

He shifted and made a 'you idiot' face at Potter, who looked at him, smiled and moved one hand out from under Draco's shirt to push hair out of his eyes. The moment for reflection was all Draco needed.

"Wait!" Draco said sharply, shoving Potter away. He felt suddenly ill. "Stop. I'm with someone."

He reached out and snatched up his glasses, and saw Potter look as if he had been slapped awake.

"I didn't-" Potter began. "I'm not-"

"Sure you're not," Draco snarled, scrambling to his feet. "Leave me alone."

*

He crawled onto Terry's bed and also Terry as soon as he got back to Ravenclaw Tower, burying his face in the worn material of his jumper, hiding from the world but mostly from Terry and how Terry would look when he told him.

"Potter kissed me," he said. "I let him, I was confused. I'm so sorry."

Terry almost jumped off the bed, but Draco held onto his jumper with both hands, kept him anchored. "What," Terry said weakly, "What - Harry Potter?"

"If he has an evil gay twin called Larry Potter," Draco growled menacingly into the jumper, "I feel I should have been informed."

Terry laughed, which was neither breaking up with Draco or going mad from jealousy. "But I - but why?"

"I don't know! That's why I was so badly startled, but I, but I was thinking," Draco said, lifting his face a little from Terry's jumper, "that it might be because things were going so badly with Cho. And I used to go out with Cho, and things went okay, and there's been all the talk of boys recently, and Potter misses Cho and isn't exactly the most balanced wand in the shop and it was all a terrible, messy mistake and let us never speak of this again!"

"You should breathe, Draco," Terry advised him.

"Don't break up with me," Draco said. "Not over this. Don't."

"No," Terry answered softly, and Draco kissed him, shook and kissed him, and then took off his own shirt and Terry's jumper, and then kissed him again.

Terry didn't break up with him over that, and if he didn't become possessed with jealousy, well, it wasn't as if anyone was challenging him to a duel over Draco's affections. Draco was fine with it. Draco was grateful.

Draco made a point of avoiding Potter afterwards, and thought he might like to avoid Potter forever and ever. As if blackening his father's name wasn't enough, he thought furiously at mealtimes when he was forced to be in the same room as Potter, and smashed his egg into tiny inedible bits and tried to listen to all the gossip about Ginny dumping Corner. Potter went silent and red whenever Draco was around, as well he should, and Draco scowled and concentrated ostentatiously on his OWLs. Father knew people on the committee, he said Draco would fly through the tests. Draco meant to fly through them, just as easy and simple as that.

When OWLs did roll around, malicious fate put him next to Potter while he was trying to perform a Levitation Charm. Professor Tofty was already talking of Potter's very great fame and Draco could not help throwing a venomous look over his shoulder, but then he remembered how important the OWLs were and how Terry and Hermione would scream if he became distracted.

He went back to his wine glass, which wavered in the air but did not fall.

OWLs triumphantly completed, Draco had imagined he would find some measure of peace left on earth, but no sooner was he comfortably settled in an armchair and contemplating having first years fan him with palm leaves, there came an urgent message from Professor Umbridge with the news that Potter was trying to break into her office.

When he came downstairs he found Umbridge with her hands in Potter's hair, which was the most disturbing thing he had seen in a good long while.

She looked at him, her eyes glittering oddly, and said: "Take his wand."

Taking extreme care not to touch Potter more than necessary, Draco slid a hand into Potter's chest pocket and removed the wand he was thankful to find there. The inside of his wrist banged against Potter's shoulder as he backed hastily away, but when Draco looked up the look of indignation on Potter's face was priceless.

Draco grinned, threw Potter's wand into the air and caught it one-handed. Looked like Potter was finally going to face the consequences for breaking rules everyone else had always had to live by.

Then he saw Millicent Bulstrode was pinning Hermione to the wall, and saw several other Inquisitors march in manhandling, amongst others, Ginny. His mouth went dry and he lowered Harry's wand, feeling as if he had been caught red-handed instead of they.

Still, they had been breaking the rules, and surely Umbridge could see Potter was the ringleader. She could see enough to call Weasley a buffoon, which made Draco snicker and all of them glare at him. She told Draco to fetch Professor Snape, which meant that she was obviously planning to be reasonable and take the best advice available.

"Doesn't surprise me," Snape said when informed of the situation, and Draco felt immensely soothed by his cool tones. "Potter has never shown much inclination to follow the school rules."

Snape had such a masterful and complete understanding of Potter. He should write a book.

He should have some Veritaserum but he didn't, and Potter was going mad and shouting something about Padfoot, and Draco could see Snape was badly shocked by that. And then Snape made his apologies, and left them all with Umbridge, who was shaking and pulling out her wand.

Suddenly Draco wanted Professor Snape back very badly.

"I am left with no alternative," Umbridge said. "This is more than a matter of school discipline, this is an issue of Ministry security... yes... yes..."

She'd call in the Ministry, of course, Draco thought with relief. He hoped Potter would be completely and horribly expelled.

"I am sure the Minister will understand that I had no choice," Umbridge said softly, and Draco watched her carefully, his heart still beating fast, just wanting to hear that Potter was expelled and everyone else had detention forever, or something, something...

Umbridge's face set, until every drooping line made her look like a toad carved from stone.

"The Cruciatus Curse ought to loosen your tongue," she breathed eagerly.

Hermione started to scream and Umbridge started to pant and Draco's mind reeled as he realised that there was no safe place, no middle ground left in the world, and against all reason bloody Dumbledore (where was he, it was all his fault) had allowed another insane teacher to run wild in his school. What had Dumbledore been thinking? What had the Ministry been thinking?

What was he going to do?

Draco held Potter's wand so tight it hurt his hand, and noticed that Potter was standing still, unmoving as Umbridge trailed her wand to rest on different places on his body, not looking in the least afraid.

Hermione began to sob and Draco thanked God, because he knew Hermione would never cry from fear, and he was suddenly filled with the warm, comfortable knowledge that Hermione had a plan and that she was about to lie through her teeth.

That idiot Weasley started yelling at her and Draco resisted the urge to choke him. Hermione,

unfazed and hiding her tearless face, kept talking about looking for Dumbledore to tell him about a weapon and Draco would forgive her for Marietta and everything if she could only get them all out of this.

"Let them see it," Hermione said dramatically, looking for an intense moment at Draco. "I hope they use it on you! In fact, I wish you'd invite loads and loads of people to come and see! Th - that would serve you right - oh, I'd love it if the wh - whole school knew where it was, and how to u - use it, and then if you annoy any of them they'll be able to s-sort you out!"

For a moment Draco intensely wished there was a weapon and they could. Most unfortunately, Umbridge looked at him and caught the wish written all over his face.

"All right, dear, let's make it just you and me," she said. "And we'll take Potter too, shall we? Get up, now."

Hermione could not possibly think Draco would let her go off somewhere with an insane teacher and Harry Rage Blackouts Potter.

"Professor Umbridge," he said loudly, "I think some of the Squad should come with you to look after-

The students you might accidentally kill.

"You will remain here until I return and make sure none of these escape," Umbridge said sharply. She looked at Draco until he nodded grudgingly, and then said: "And you two can go ahead and show me the way. Lead on."

Before Draco could think up any less suicidal plans, they were gone, and he was left with all the other students looking at him.

Weasley started cursing through his gag.

"Pipe down," Draco said, beginning to pace the room. "I know the concept is hard for you to understand, but I am trying to think."

Hermione and Potter were in the hands of a lunatic, but if he alerted the Ministry - Umbridge was theirs and they might not believe him. If he told Father, he was very unlikely to see why Hermione had to be kept safe, and besides that there was no time, no time to alert anyone.

Draco hated to admit it, but until he thought of something better, it was going to have to be the vigilantes.

"Let them go," he said sharply.

"Beg pardon?" said Zabini, and Draco wheeled on him.

"Use your brain, or am I the only one here that can? You think the Ministry will be passing out trophies to people who let some woman torture the Boy Who Lived? Think! Or don't bother because I'll think for you, and I say let them go."

Crabbe, Goyle and Millicent Bulstrode all stepped back from their captives at once, and Zabini and Warrington hesitated, looking around at the others in a vaguely betrayed way. Draco looked at them scathingly over his glasses and Zabini stepped back.

"I'm sorry," Warrington said, "why are we all taking orders from some titchy little Ravenclaw?"

"I have had enough," exclaimed Ginny, grabbing her wand and casting a Hex that made Warrington fall down with his face covered in bats. She whirled around and Draco was quite thankful to be spared the wrath of Weasley as she pushed her hair out of her face with her wand. "Thanks, Draco. C'mon."

"Don't take the gag off Weasley!" Draco called out as she left, but with little hope she would listen.

"What - what should we do?" Crabbe asked. "Should we go help them - I mean we learned a lot of stuff at the-"

"At the what?" Zabini asked quickly.

"Nowhere," Draco responded, very firmly. "And we're not going to do anything of the sort. We're going to go find some teachers."

"Why?" Warrington demanded.

Draco tilted his glasses down his nose and gave Warrington a look he usually reserved for Potter.

"Because," he explained slowly, "it's the smart thing to do."

*

He went to Professor Snape and Professor Snape told him it was all under control. Then he looked at Draco again, and told him that he had done well. Draco went upstairs after that, comforted and tired as if he had been studying all day, and crawled into bed beside Terry.

Terry looked at him with wide eyes. "Draco," he said, his voice fearful. "Draco, what have you done?"

Draco curled his hand into a fist against Terry's side, and saw Terry had been afraid he would do something terrible all this time. "The right thing," he said at last. "I think."

Terry looked surprised and inexpressibly relieved, and Draco curled into him, face light against the curve of Terry's neck even if his hands were still curled into fists, and slept with some approximation of peace.

Until he woke up in the cold light of day, with Terry dead to the world and all his other friends still and far away in his bed, and heard his owl flapping frantically outside the window, its talons scrabbling desperately at the glass and whispering thinly of disaster before

Draco had even wrenched himself from his bed to let the cold world in.

It was an Owl from his mother, saying that Father had been thrown in Azkaban.

That was all that came through to Draco on the first reading, as he left the window open and let himself slide down the wall, sat on the cold space of carpet and held the parchment carefully, trying to concentrate on it, trying to memorise it because that was all he knew to do with things he read, that should make it better.

Father had been sent to get some idiot Prophecy or other, and Potter and his gang had caught him. Not over anything important, over a stupid Prophecy, as if anyone would refuse to go get a prophecy when the Dark Lord told him to. Draco thought of Dad's tense face and his relenting towards Draco: he'd been afraid, he'd been trying to mend bridges before it was too late, Draco knew it, and in return Draco had let Potter's henchmen go free to capture his father.

And it didn't seem to matter anymore that Father hadn't liked him being Sorted into Ravenclaw, that nothing had been quite as Draco had hoped, because Father had been thrown down so low - he hadn't had his career hurt or his things confiscated, he, Draco's proud father, had been thrown in a prison and that was too huge for any of the rest to matter. He was God again, as he'd been in Draco's childhood, attainable one day if Draco could just be good enough.

Only Draco'd helped throw him in prison instead. That was where trying to walk the middle line got you, that was where even a split second of sympathy with Potter got you, and nobody read letters in Azkaban so Draco couldn't even write at once and confess it all and say I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...

He didn't want to talk to anyone for a while, but a few days later he went down to Crabbe and Goyle, and they looked at him with grave scared eyes, and he said the words to them at least.

"I was wrong. I did something and look what happened - we're going to make it right. Will you trust me?"

They both nodded and Draco stopped holding his breath and looked down at his hands. He hadn't even noticed his fists were so tightly curled that his nails had cut into his palm. He went upstairs with them, talking quietly, and when he saw Potter the rush of hatred he felt made him feel for a moment as if he was going to choke, all the air pressed out of his lungs.

Potter looked terrible, white and drained, but he was still free and Father wasn't.

"You're dead, Potter," he said quietly.

Potter looked startled to see him, softer for a second and then grim. "Funny," he said. "You'd think I'd have stopped walking around. What's the matter with you, Malfoy? Ginny told me what you-"

"Shut up!"

Potter's eyes looked much colder, more far-away than Draco was used to. Draco expected he

was gloating over his little triumph.

"You're going to pay," Draco promised him. "I'm going to make you pay for what you've done to my father. You said pick a side, but I don't have to, do I? You've picked it for me."

"What, going off to join Voldemort?" Potter demanded, going whiter and whiter by the second. Draco flinched and felt the other two flinch behind him, and saw Potter's cold eyes narrow. "Not scared of him, are you?" Potter asked.

Draco moved forward and hated him for five years' worth of reasons, and most of all for this moment. "You think you're such a big man, Potter. You wait. I'll have you."

At which point Potter went a slow, dull red. "Er..."

"I mean I'm going to kill you, Potter!" Draco yelled, fury and humiliation sharpening to a spike inside him, and he went for his wand.

Potter was faster as he always was, always, and Draco was going to beat him to death with his bare hands if he had to, but then Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall both interrupted them in succession. Draco would not even look at Professor Snape, who had told him he'd done the right thing. He didn't want to look at anybody or think about anything. He was just biding his time.

*

He wrote a letter to his mother by the lake, so none of the Ravenclaws could see it, and he promised to do his best from now on, to do better from now on, to take the destiny his father had always meant for his son and make it his own. He bit his lip savagely as he wrote and managed not to actually cry.

Then he watched the owl fly away, a small shape in the sky, becoming smaller by the minute. He wanted to go home, and he wanted Dad to be there when he got back.

He was packing his things in his trunk when Terry said: "Look - Draco, we need to talk about what happened to Harry and the others that night-"

"I wasn't aware anything had happened to them," Draco replied in a chilly, distant voice. "The way I hear it, they happened to other people."

He felt distant enough that he was surprised he couldn't float away and see them, Terry sitting unhappy at the edge of his bed and Draco hunched over his chest, but he was still there and still had to live through this, folding clothes and scarves, material rough under his hands.

"I know he was your father and I'm sorry," Terry said. "But isn't it better this way, so you won't be forced to do anything you don't want to do-"

"My father's in prison and nothing is better this way!" Draco shouted, and he saw Terry flinch from his voice out of the corner of his eye, knew this was the side of himself the other Ravenclaws didn't want to see and wouldn't understand, the side he'd buried in books, the side his father might have loved, and he was glad. "And you don't know anything about what

I want."

"Surely you don't want anyone to get hurt," Terry said in the soft, reasonable voice that was driving Draco slowly insane. "I heard Neville came back with blood all over his face-"

"Oh, and what a loss he would have been!"

Draco's voice went out like a whip and he saw Terry flinch again.

"You don't mean that."

Draco was panting. He felt like he'd like someone else to suffer a bit, actually, for a change. "Oh? And what if I do?"

"If I thought you really meant that," Terry answered, even more slowly than he usually spoke, "then I guess I couldn't-"

"Fine!" Draco said loudly.

The word rang conclusively around the room, final as a slammed door. Draco was sure Terry was doing what he was doing, looking back at the conversation, searching silently and frantically for the fragments of what had suddenly broken and working out a way to put them back together. Draco was sick and tired of all this thinking.

"I'll be too busy anyway," he went on harshly, still not feeling quite as if it was him speaking. "I've got plans for next year."

He saw Terry swallow out of the corner of his eye, and he hit the inside of his wrist hard. The pain brought him back to the room, feeling every little stupid detail and wanting to take it all back, go crawling for some comfort, but it wouldn't save his father, would it?

"Okay," Terry said, his voice wavering.

And it was irrational and stupid and too much to ask for, but Draco banged his wrist against the edge of his trunk again and thought, he could've fought for me.

*

He didn't plan on hexing Potter on the train home. It was just that he walked by, looking remote and untouchable as he did these days, and Draco thought about what he was going home to and nodded to Crabbe and Goyle and sprang out.

Immediately afterwards a carriage full of Hufflepuffs sprang out at Draco, and then Weasley, Ginny and Hermione came rushing out to see what the commotion was, and everyone had their wands out. There was a tight, taut moment when they realised that. Macmillan raised his wand.

"Don't!" Potter said sharply, and he lowered it like a good little minion.

"Draco," Ginny said, her hand on her wand and her voice aggressive. "You can't do this to

yourself. It's not Harry's fault, your father belongs locked up. He tried to kill me when I was eleven-

"He can't have tried very hard. You seem pretty healthy to me," Draco spat, and Ginny's face hardened.

"Forget it," she said. "It's no use talking to him. You're your father's son after all, aren't you?"

"Who else's son was I going to be?" Draco shouted at her back as she retreated into the carriage, but she didn't answer.

Hermione tried next, putting her hand on his arm as she usually did when she was trying to explain something to him, looking up at him with familiar brown eyes. He looked down at her and didn't want any explanations, didn't want to think any more.

"Think about this logically, Draco," she said in her confident way. "Your father deserved everything he got-

And he was sick of people badmouthing his father when he was in Azkaban and couldn't say a word to defend himself, when he didn't want to hear reasons or accusations or anything but the reassurance that his father would be there when he came home. She hadn't cared about the Quibbler or about Marietta or about him, she didn't care what happened to his father now, and his father had been disappointed in him for being friends with her-

"Nobody asked your opinion," Draco said through his teeth. "You filthy little mudblood."

Hermione snatched her hand off his arm as if it had been burned, and Draco looked at her face. He felt numb again, he would have thought he'd enjoy seeing someone else hurt for a change but he didn't, he just kept thinking that she'd never heard anyone use that word before, never, because if someone else had said it to her he would have killed them.

"Don't, Ron," Hermione said when Weasley went for his wand, her voice trembling. "Don't - he's not even worth it," she finished in husky tones, and then she turned back to Draco and slapped him as hard as she could about the face.

It stung. Draco kept his face to the side and felt his skin burn as she walked away, Weasley at her side, and Crabbe and Goyle slunk away as well and now it was just him and Potter left, this new Potter who was paler than before and looked haunted and who Draco hated more than he would have thought possible.

"Showing me some mercy back there?" he asked. "I'm sure it gave you a warm condescending glow. Excuse me."

He would have turned away, but Potter said without expression: "Actually, I wanted to hex you until you didn't even look like a person anymore."

"Well, why didn't you?" Draco demanded.

"What would have been the point?" Potter asked. "You'd still have been a person. It wouldn't have changed your mind about anything. Nothing ever seems to change your mind about

anything."

Draco felt as if his mind had been changed completely and into something new and it had hurt, so he had no idea what to say to that stupid statement. He stepped aside silently for Cho and Marietta as they went by, Cho blushing because of Potter and Marietta wearing a balaclava because Muggles and their Mudblood kind always hurt you unless you got to them first.

"She's with Corner now," he blurted, out of the sheer aching desire to hurt Potter, and then winced at how childish he sounded.

Potter looked blank. "I don't give a damn who she's going out with," he said. "I shouldn't-" he made an angry sound in the back of his throat, which was the first sign of emotion Draco had seen him show. "I don't care about anything like that. Not now."

Draco looked out the window at the landscape speeding by, too fast for him to really take note of what was going on.

"Someone died in that attack on the Ministry," Potter said suddenly, harshly, as if his throat hurt. "He was - he was a cousin of yours."

Draco wondered desperately what the hell Potter thought he was going on about now. Was he trying to rub it in that Draco had convicts in the family, had he never heard of Aunt Bellatrix? What did Potter care that Sirius Black was dead?

"And he was - you'll never get a chance to know him now," Potter said, his voice still sounding like it was scraping his throat. "Other things happened in the Ministry that day besides-"

"I don't care!" Draco yelled, horrified that he thought he could see tears in Potter's eyes and horrified that this did not inspire any desire in Draco to mock him until he fell down. He felt something tangled and sharp in his own throat and he wanted to get away. "I don't care about - about anything, I just want my father back!"

Potter leaned his head back against the window and visibly got a grip on himself. "Fine," he said, his eyes shut. "Go to hell, Malfoy."

Draco walked backwards, catching himself before he stumbled. "You first."

He found Crabbe and Goyle and walked with them through the train corridor, not able to sit still, wishing he could run to some remedy and feeling that even if one existed, he would not be able to run fast enough. He passed one carriage and saw Terry and Anthony inside, obviously deep in conversation and going quiet, staring out at him as they saw him pass.

Crabbe cleared his throat. "If you want, you could-"

"No," Draco said at once, knowing that he could not sit there and see Terry look sad, see Anthony and think about the consequences if - when he went home and saw the dark figure his father had spoken about, not when he had to go prepared to do what he had to do for his father, when he had to go prepared to kneel. "No," he said again, and he sounded more

certain. "I'm where I'm meant to be."

He was more certain than ever when the train pulled in, and he saw Potter get off and be surrounded by a mob of people, Weasleys and their old teachers and random pink-haired fans, saw him swallowed in an enormous loving crowd. His mother stood on the platform, tall and poised and looking very alone, and when she saw Draco her face changed and then smoothed almost instantly, but the moment of disturbance was enough to send Draco stumbling off the train towards her. He hadn't held her in public and without compunction since he was ten years old.

"Oh, Draco," she said against his ear. "Draco."

Draco met Potter's eyes for some reason, in the midst of his crowd, and their gazes held, caught looking at each other for a moment without blinking, until Draco closed his eyes and hid his face, only wanting to hold his mother.

"Don't worry," he whispered to her, locking his arms behind her back so she would not feel him shaking. "Mother, don't. I'll fix things. I'll make everything right."

Chapter Seven

It was, hands down, the worst summer of Draco's life.

He wanted his father to be there when he got home but failing that, he expected peace and quiet. He did not expect the manor to be filled with people who Draco vaguely felt must have used the tradesman's entrance.

There was a short, creepy man with an alarmingly shiny hand who giggled at Draco and ran away, and a strange sad man with a look of resigned despair on his face. He was sitting next to a woman who looked too Gothic to be quite sane.

An alarmingly large man in tight robes and in dire need of a manicure was the first to speak to Draco.

He was also the first to touch Draco in unwanted ways, since he apparently felt that trailing sharp yellow nails down the side of a total stranger's face was acceptable behaviour. "Hello there, little boy," he rasped. "How old are you?"

"Almost seventeen," said Draco, who had been sixteen for weeks now.

The man grimaced in what looked like disappointment, showing pointed teeth. "Ah well," he said, giving Draco's cheek a final stroke. "I'm sure you were stunning in your day."

Draco went backwards so fast he knocked into his mother, and then he gripped her arm to keep his balance and held on because he needed an anchor in a world gone mad.

"Mother," he said in a small, tight voice. "Who are these awful people?"

"Bad news, Draco," she whispered. "They're family. That is your Aunt Bellatrix."

The woman who looked like a Gothic banshee stretched on their sofa and gave Draco a little wave. Draco saw that she had the Black bone structure, though she clearly did not keep to the Black skin care regime.

"Please tell me that man isn't a relative!"

The grey-haired man with the sharpened teeth grinned. "Not technically. But I'd be delighted if you called me Uncle Fenrir."

Mother spoke softly into Draco's ear. "Do not go anywhere alone with that man."

"Don't worry," Draco said.

Aunt Bellatrix waved a hand in the direction of the sad-looking man. "This is your Uncle Rodolphus, worse luck," she said in much the same tone as Mother spoke of house elves these days. "I had to get married, you see," she went on. "In case there were Dark, lordly, glorious children."

"Yes, dear," said Rodolphus, in the tones of one lost to all hope.

Fenrir started ordering around a pack (Draco tried without success to think of a different word) of rather feral-looking men and women, and in the mill Draco went over to the sofa and sat as far away as he could from Aunt Bellatrix. Mother began to talk to this new aunt in a low voice, adjuring her not to say such things in front of the children.

"Come now, Narcissa," said Uncle Oh Please God No Fenrir. "Draco's not a child. More's the pity."

Draco looked at Uncle Rodolphus because he preferred this to looking anywhere else, and met a look of bleak understanding. "I liked forceful women," Uncle Rodolphus explained in an undertone. "That didn't work out very well for me."

"Shut up, Rodolphus," said Aunt Bellatrix.

"Yes, dear."

"I might prefer boys," volunteered Draco.

Uncle Rodolphus looked mistily approving. "I never tried that," he said. "Life without women sounds lovely and peaceful."

Later in Mother's private rooms, Mother explained that providing a base for some of the Dark Lord's followers was the only thing she'd been able to think of.

"I am not..." she said, and stopped unhappily, Draco's beautiful poised mother, sitting at her mirror trying to fit broken words together. "I always thought it was wiser to observe from the sidelines, to provide support and information, but it has not worked out that way. I passed on what information that house elf gave me, and it ended with Lucius in prison and Sirius dead."

"Potter's godfather the blood traitor dead," Aunt Bellatrix corrected, her voice rasping in a way that reminded Draco of Fenrir Greyback and upset him badly.

"Sirius," Mother said sharply, and then looked at her own reflection. Her reflection looked back, paler than Mother and trapped under ice, and Mother's face smoothed as if she was imitating it. "Still, that had to be done, and with some luck it will lower the Order's morale."

"Wait," Draco said. "I don't - I don't understand. Why should - Potter-"

Bellatrix looked at him, her eyes black as ink in the low light. "Oh yes," she said. "You go to school with him, don't you? What do you think of him?" She did not wait for him to respond. "I was a little disappointed, myself. I killed his godfather before his eyes and he couldn't hold a Cruciatus on me for more than a few minutes. Good for his age, of course, but it hardly makes him a being of preternatural power."

Normally Draco could sit and listen to the music of Potter being disparaged all day long, and in fact he was starting to warm up to Aunt Bellatrix, but there were more important things than that right now.

"What side," he said, very quietly, "was Sirius Black on? What happened?"

So his mother told him, quietly too, while Bellatrix sat in the dark and laughed at them. She told him about his cousin, and the information she had passed on, and what had happened next, and Draco sat near her in the low light, listening to her low voice, and thought, that's it, then. Not that he hadn't been sure before, because he had been, but this made things even clearer. No matter how close Potter had been to crying on the train, how much it had almost seemed like he had meant it when he said You'll never get the chance to know him now.

He would never have abandoned his father or taken Potter's pity, so he was glad that Potter would never forgive Mother for sending Sirius Black to his death.

"It's perfectly all right, Mother," he said, trying to sound like Father at his most calm, which made him miss Father so much he wanted to hurt someone. "You did absolutely the right thing, and you shouldn't have to do anything but observe. I can-"

"Draco," Mother said, sounding not at all reassured.

"Of course you can," said Aunt Bellatrix.

When she started to move towards them Draco almost scooted away, as he would have if a wild animal had approached him, but she was Mother's sister and Mother had talked about her and Andromeda (the one who died) and it hardly seemed polite. So he stayed still, and Mother's hand pressing painfully tight around his thanked him for that, and Aunt Bellatrix came over to them and knelt by their chair, and Mother and Draco bent their heads towards the shadow of Aunt Bellatrix's dark hair.

"He deserved to die," Aunt Bellatrix murmured. "He walked out the door and never thought about any of us again, his family, we've been dead to him for years."

People like the Weasleys were blood traitors and hardly minded the name because they were all in it together. They didn't understand that blood meant family, and that no matter what excuses Sirius Black might have thought he had, a traitor was a traitor.

"I'm glad to have met you properly, Draco," said Aunt Bellatrix, her face softening.

Up close she looked tired, and he could trace his mother's features in her face. More than his mother she reminded him of Grandma Black, who had not really been his grandmother but had that title by grace of being the Black matriarch. Father used to say she was a shrill virago, but Draco's only memories of her was when he was three, and Mother used to put him on Grandma's lap. She was very old by then and she never spoke loudly to Draco. She held him in her lap and rocked him, and she smelled like mothballs but she held him so carefully and he would sit with her quietly, as he hardly ever liked to sit with anyone, because she knew that he was special.

When Draco was three, Grandma Black died.

It wasn't until later that he learned he was special because of Sirius and Bellatrix who were gone, and Andromeda and Regulus who were dead. Everything had seemed assured, and then disaster had struck so quickly and his mother had been the only daughter left of the ancient

house of Black. Grandma Black was the matriarch of that great pureblood fear, a dying line.

It was not until Draco was eight that he understood he was special because he was all that was left.

He looked at Bellatrix's dark, intense eyes and strong jaw, and he closed his eyes and pretended he could smell mothballs. She would help them. They were family.

"You'll want to see the Dark Lord, of course," Bellatrix whispered in his ear.

Draco swallowed and said, "Yes."

*

Draco walked carefully in the Manor that summer, with the werewolves crawling over his father's land. They scared him and that made him resent them, and resentment did not help with his lingering, persistent fear every time they moved oddly. Draco was not sure how much they were naturally different from humans and not bothering to conceal it, how much they were trying to be like animals or how much they were trying to be like Fenrir, but he was sure that every time he found himself in a room with the pack, he felt like prey.

He was trying to sidle by a couple of them and not meet their eyes when his eyes found someone new.

"Professor Lupin!" he exclaimed, absolutely scandalised.

Professor Lupin, dressed even worse than usual and moving with the fluid, rolling grace of the animals. He looked at Draco and was suddenly different, his head on one side as if he was nothing but a kindly professor anxious to answer Draco's questions.

"Dumbledore fired me," he said, just a trace of Fenrir's rasp in the voice Draco remembered as soft. "What did you expect me to do?"

Draco stared at him and answered: "You could have become a librarian."

Professor Lupin looked amused for a moment, but then he saw Draco's face change and his own went grave a second before Fenrir's arm landed about his thin shoulders.

"Catching up, are we?" Fenrir asked. "You must have taught him in school. Perhaps I should've been bookish like you, Remus. I think I'd have loved being a schoolteacher. How old was Draco when you saw him last - sweet thirteen and never been mauled?"

"I follow your lead, Fenrir," Professor Lupin said quietly. "Doesn't mean I'll laugh at your bad jokes."

Fenrir leered. "Who was joking? Tell me, was little Draco here your favourite student?"

"No," Draco answered at once, remembering who had been.

Professor Lupin caught his eye as he was turning away and smiled, like the Professor Lupin

who Mandy and Padma and Lisa had made fools of themselves over years ago.

"He might have been my favourite Ravenclaw," he said, and then tiredly knocked away Fenrir's arm.

Clearly Professor Lupin had superior taste Draco had never noticed, on account of his extremely poor taste in clothing. Draco smiled back a tiny bit before getting hurriedly out of Fenrir's way, and after that he was able to tolerate Professor Lupin better than the rest of the gaunt ragged things who wandered like strays under the high marble ceilings of his father's house.

Aunt Bellatrix brought him to see the Dark Lord after a week in the manor, and he was almost glad to go. It was the first step to getting his life back.

The Dark Lord was living in a tumbledown old house that under normal circumstances, Draco would have scorned, but that day he scarcely noticed it. He tried to feel awed by the great destiny his father had said fate would have in store for him one day, when he was worthy of it, but mostly he was sweating and hoping the Dark Lord would not notice, feeling the bite of Aunt Bellatrix's fingernails in his shoulder and feeling the pit of his stomach shift sickly.

When they reached their goal, the pit of his stomach flipped and tipped him over into a different world.

Forget the werewolves, that did not look human, but it was sitting on a carved chair and the centre of the room. Aunt Bellatrix was looking at it and did not seem to be breathing anymore, the giggling oddball with the shiny hand was scurrying to do its bidding, and there was no way this was anyone but the Dark Lord.

He had a high voice that left cold echoes around your head. "This is the Malfoy boy? Do you know how much your father has disappointed me?"

Draco wanted to defend his father but actually he didn't know anything, except that the Dark Lord had red eyes.

There was an enormous snake winding through the carvings of his chair, and the Dark Lord stroked its massive coils with one long white hand. He spoke slowly, in the way Draco knew his father talked to business associates, and perhaps Draco would have been impressed by all this showmanship if his father had kept impressing him with it, or if Anthony and Terry's great common sense had not rubbed off on him enough that it was hard for him to concentrate on anything but red eyes.

"He wants to make up for it, my Lord," Bellatrix said, shoving him forward and onto his knees.

The floor was cold and his knees ached, and Draco swallowed and tried to force words into his dry mouth. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I do. Uh, my Lord."

He wondered whether 'Your Darkness, Sir' would be appropriate, and then wished his mind would not scatter into a dozen panicked fleeing pieces when he was scared. He wanted out of

here, and away from this, but the other side had taken his father and the Dark Lord was the only way to get him back.

Besides, Father had always said the Dark Lord was the most powerful wizard in the world and that he would change the world. And the world did need changing.

When Draco looked at the floor, it wasn't so bad.

"Well," said the Dark Lord. "A student in Hogwarts. Dumbledore's always been so very... soft about his students."

Draco felt that Dumbledore assigning murderers to teach them was an interesting definition of soft but the Dark Lord sounded like he thought Draco was going to be useful - which he was, of course the Dark Lord was going to recognise it, was going to appreciate him and Father was going to be proud...

"Look at me, Draco Malfoy," said Voldemort, and he leaned forward as Draco looked up. The Dark Lord licked his thin lips and whispered: "I can read minds, you know."

Draco tried hard not to recoil and not to think about red eyes anymore.

"You want your father back," the Dark Lord went on, his voice a promise Draco's father had followed before him. "You want his failure to serve me pardoned, and the Malfoys restore to a high place in the world, and for you to be acclaimed as the greatest of them all."

Yes, and yes, and yes. "Yes," Draco breathed.

The Dark Lord looked mildly puzzled. "And you're in Ravenclaw, apparently. How odd. We don't get many of your kind here."

Perhaps because you have red eyes! thought Draco, and then hastily tried to think about something else.

"I could use someone with some intelligence," said the Dark Lord, sneering towards Shiny Hand. "I think perhaps I could be persuaded to make a bargain."

"A bargain," Draco echoed helplessly, feeling as if he had very little on the table.

"Respect. Glory. Your father and your family honour restored. All the rewards that my most loyal followers will receive."

"Yes," Draco said.

The Dark Lord leaned back in his chair, his eyes glittering.

"Do you think you could kill Albus Dumbledore, Draco? He might let one of his students get close enough to try."

Draco did not think about Professor Dumbledore's power. He thought about his father instead, thought that if Voldemort was ready to give him this important a job he must see

something in Draco, and once Father saw that, once Father was free because of Draco...

He hated Dumbledore anyway, Dumbledore who never protected any of them for anything, who was meant to watch over a whole school but only had eyes for Harry Potter. He hated Dumbledore, and it would be worth it to trade him for his father. Draco thought those words, thought trade, exchange, bargain, and refused to think about the word kill.

"Yes," he said, very low.

"How very satisfactory," Voldemort told him, his voice just as low. "You understand that the penalty for those who fail the Dark Lord is death. Since you would be the second of your family to disappoint me, I believe I might count the entire Malfoy clan as... a dead loss."

Mother, thought Draco, and looked up into a pitiless red gaze.

"Exactly," the Dark Lord murmured. "Think of it as an incentive. I do not tolerate failure. And I will have absolute loyalty. Tell me, Draco, are you willing to take my Mark?"

Draco thought of being very young and seeing his parents get ready for parties, and seeing Father's sleeve slip to show something Draco had not recognised.

What's that?

The mark of something that should have been.

Father would want him to have it. Draco wanted to have it: it would mean there was no going back, save him from any backsliding and failing Father, make his choice final and mark him as valued, and chosen.

Draco opened his mouth to tell the Dark Lord yes one more time.

"I do not want you to have it," the Dark Lord told him. "It would be far too likely to get spotted in school. I wanted to know that you would take it." He leaned back, the snake crawling up his thin chest to curl around his neck, and added: "I want you to earn it."

Father. Fame. Glory. And in the balance, his life and his parents' lives.

Draco got up, and then bowed. He tried not to tremble. He was going to do this, going to be the man of his house, the man his father would have wanted. Voldemort had chosen him. It was an honour.

He lifted his chin and met the Dark Lord's eyes for the last time. "I will."

*

The next day, Aunt Bellatrix started Draco's Occlumency lessons.

She started them in typical Aunt Bellatrix fashion, which was to say insanely and with a lack of regard for others. She came striding into Draco's bedroom when he was sleeping, and it was only thanks to his enormous terror of Fenrir Greyback that he was fully clothed when she

stripped off the bedclothes.

"You didn't handle your first meeting with Our Lord too badly," she told him as a light conversational opener, "but do you think that Dumbledore won't take one look at you, read your mind and kill you where you stand?"

Draco blinked and thought fuzzily that if Dumbledore could in fact read minds, which seemed to be a far more popular spectator sport than Draco had ever dreamed, then he had been reading Draco's mind for years and would know Draco wanting him dead was par for the course.

"Very amusing, Draco," Bellatrix said, and when he stared at her she bared her teeth. "You start off by casting Legilimens, but in the end... it's a mindset. You hardly need to be able to master wandless magic to read a mind."

"Master wandless magic?" Draco heard himself bleat.

"First you must learn how to block your mind," Bellatrix told him, and suddenly she was not just glancing, he could feel her in there, rifling through his memories, feel the edges of her savage smile at the insides of his mind as she rifled through everything he had never wanted seen. Outrage well and truly woke Draco as his aunt went over the feeling of Cho's smooth thighs, the taste of the back of Terry's neck, and then panic took a running leap and knocked outrage down because in a moment she was going to see Potter.

Which had of course been nothing, a moment or three of insanity because Potter had gone mad from his lack of skills with the ladies and Draco had hit his head, but she'd want to talk about it and she wasn't seeing it and it was private.

"Occlumens, Draco. Empty your mind," whispered Aunt Bellatrix. "And mean it."

Draco thought fast. Nobody could empty their mind, nobody could, but you could shut off bits of it enough to seem empty, lock away thoughts from yourself because you didn't want to see them, that was easy, he did it all the time, oh God, he could feel her getting close, he could feel her feeling Potter's hair knotted around his fingers-

"Occlumens!" Draco shouted, and Bellatrix actually, physically, fell back.

She smiled when she looked at him, bright and triumphant, and came to sit on his bed, putting her hand on his shoulder. She always gripped too tight. "Draco, on your first try," she breathed. "That's very good. Our Master will be so pleased-" she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his forehead. "We'll all be proud of you."

Draco closed his eyes and thought about putting his arm around her neck. She was frightening and familiar at the same time, she was family, and he wanted her to go away forever but perhaps to love him, as well.

His train of thought was cut off by his mother's voice.

"Our Master?" said Mother, and he opened his eyes to see her standing on his threshold, thin and golden and almost wavering like a candle flame as she spoke. "Proud? Bella, what have

you done?"

Aunt Bellatrix let go of Draco, her eyes glowing with missionary zeal. "Cissy, wait until you hear-"

"I don't want to talk about things like - like the Dark Lord in front of Draco," Mother said, swallowing. "I want to speak with you alone - and I warn you, if you have endangered my son-"

"Mother, I'm not a child," Draco interrupted. "I can help you, I want to help you-"

Mother did not look at him, but repeated in an imperious voice: "Bella!"

Aunt Bellatrix looked at Mother's cold face and reluctantly got off the bed and went towards her. She and Mother left the room, and Draco was tempted to go after them and demand to be included in the conference, but his head hurt and his heart was still beating fast. Aunt Bellatrix could read his mind any time she liked, he would not be safe for a moment, that had been a very close thing, and he didn't want her to know. He was going to have to get good at Occlumency in a hurry.

He sat in bed with his arms locked around his knees for a long time, and when he ventured outside Professor Lupin saw him, and immediately offered to make him a cup of tea. Draco noticed almost absently that he looked ill, and had a feeling that while Lupin said he only took two sugars, he would have preferred more. He hoped Professor Lupin wasn't coming down with anything.

*

It was almost evening when Mother called Draco to her room.

He stood uncertainly in the middle of the floor as she sat by her dresser, her reflection paler than ever in the mirror. Her wand lay thrumming with energy on the dresser, and one of her hands was clasped tight around it, the knuckles white, but when she spoke her voice was icy calm.

Mother always had an air of distance about her, all her acts like tableaux instead of like Father, who seemed really warm sometimes, who seemed able to mean it and feel it. Draco stood watching her watch him in her mirror and thought with insane detachment that this might be why he never tried so hard for Mother, even though he never doubted that she loved him, and he doubted Father all the time.

"Draco," said Mother. "I forbid you to do this. We can - I have offered the Dark Lord the manor, Bella is a favourite of his. Or we can find some other way. I am trying to use your father's contacts in the Ministry."

All of whom are not going to help, as Draco can tell by his mother's pinched mouth when she receives her Owls in the morning. Father had such pride in his contacts, in the way the Malfoy name had become currency, and now the currency is worthless, like that of a conquered country. All his life Draco heard about the power of his name, and now that they need power, it has failed him. He did not realise so many things would be lost along with

Father.

"Mother, don't do this. I'm not a child, the Dark Lord chose me-"

Mother still looked at the mirror, a silent spell arranging her hair, lifting up long light swathes of pale gold. Her eyes in the mirror looked cold and desperate.

"He chose you so he would have an excuse for getting rid of us, so Bellatrix would not see it was all spite, spite because Lucius failed him. He is not giving you a chance."

She was just saying this because she did not think he could do it, as Father would have thought he couldn't, because everyone thought he wasn't quite good enough. She didn't see that he could, that he was going to save her.

"He is!" Draco insisted. "Mother, think about what he's offering. He'll give it all back - he'll give Father back. You want Father back, don't you?"

He threw that appeal at her because he knew it was too powerful to meet with anything but a positive response, and he felt cold when her mirrored eyes met his. Her hair was still lazily arranging itself, drifting on the air, catching the candlelight, and her voice was still cold.

She gazed at him in the mirror and said: "I would rather have you."

For a moment, Draco was confused and pleased, and then he realised what she was saying. That she would leave Father to rot in Azkaban, that she didn't really care about him, that she was abandoning Father like everyone else in the world was and Draco was the only one left.

Mother got up suddenly, stowing her wand away, breaking the spell so her hair fell loose around her shoulders. "I need to go out," she said. "I need to - I need to find..." She walked about her room in a few swift steps, taking up her cloak, putting the hood up over her gleaming hair. She stopped beside him for a moment, her face in shadow, and put her hand up to his cheek. "Everything will be all right, Draco."

"Yes, I know," Draco said obstinately, not wanting to look at her for very long.

She Disapparated without another word, going somewhere else as she liked to do, when she left the room when Draco had childish tantrums, when he suspected she was glad he was going to Hogwarts so she could write him letters and send him parcels with all her love from a distance and under wraps.

Aunt Bellatrix came storming in almost as soon as Mother had gone, and looked around the room with a sort of expectant demanding, as if Mother was hiding under her bed and Aunt Bellatrix could force her to get out.

"Where has she - oh, no she hasn't," Aunt Bellatrix said through her teeth. "I won't have it. I won't have her interfering with my Master, or with you, and I certainly won't have one of my family beholden to a miserable half-blood of doubtful loyalties!"

While Draco appreciated Aunt Bellatrix's support, he hoped she knew she was raving like a loon.

Before he could tell her that, she had Disapparated as well. Possibly they had nowhere to go, possibly they were just taunting Draco with the fact that because of idiot laws he couldn't legally Apparate quite yet, even though he was all but seventeen.

Draco left his mother's room and slammed the door, walking along the corridors to his room in the gathering dark, and saw Professor Lupin looking even sicker than usual. The man needed vitamins.

"Mr Malfoy," he said hoarsely. "Where's your mother?"

Draco scowled. "She went out. So did Aunt Bellatrix."

"And left you alone?"

"I do not actually require a nursemaid," Draco informed him. "Besides, I think Mother quite likes you."

Professor Lupin appeared to be getting all worked up, his hackles rising, his voice rasping, and Draco was forcibly and horribly reminded afresh of Fenrir. "Do none of you think?" he snarled. "Do none of you realise? Tonight is the full moon!"

Draco felt abruptly as if he was going to faint, and forbade himself to do so very sternly indeed.

"You're alone," Lupin said softly, "in a house full of werewolves."

Draco felt that rubbing it in was very insensitive. Teachers were supposed to make children feel reassured, damn it.

Lupin's face in the gathering dark was suddenly very sinister. All the hairs on Draco's arm were standing up as if they wanted to run away up to his neck, and in this light Lupin's greying hair didn't look like age and illness, it looked like the brindled, silvery fur of a wolf. Draco remembered the way he had moved that first day, before he knew someone who would expect to see Professor Lupin was watching.

Draco stumbled backwards.

"Fenrir will be able to smell it. Smell you, and that there's nobody else to protect you," Lupin continued. "Look... There's a potion I take, the Dark Lord arranges for me to have it, and it lets me keep my mind when I transform. You need to go to your room and barricade yourself in there."

"I'm way ahead of you," Draco told him, going back another step.

"Draco," said Lupin. "Listen. I don't want to put myself between you and Fenrir overtly. Challenging his authority is no part of my plan. Putting myself at your door to guard you would be an offensive move, but if you would allow me in the room with you-"

Draco tried not to tremble. "Don't like sharing your food, is that it? Fat chance."

"I'm safe with the Potion," Lupin snarled at him, looking very dangerous indeed. He paused and then said: "I promise you. Professor Snape makes it."

"Oh," Draco said uncertainly. "Why - Aunt Bellatrix told me about the things werewolves do for the Dark Lord, for the cause... why would you want to be conscious through it?"

"Because," Lupin said evenly, "it means that I will only do exactly as much as I have to, to stay with Fenrir, and nothing more."

Draco thought about that: about being aware, about feeling human, when the Dark Lord tossed Amelia Bones to the... He stopped thinking about it at once.

He crossed his arms protectively over his chest, and said: "Why should I trust you?"

Lupin's voice stayed even, with just a whisper of a snarl behind it. "Because you have no other choice."

Potter'd liked him, Draco thought suddenly, but then Potter had liked Professor Madly Abusing Other Students Moody. Potter was a complete idiot.

"I..." Draco said, and cursed himself for sounding feeble-minded. "Yes. All right."

They went into Draco's room as his knees tried not to knock and his throat tried not to seize up and his brain utterly let him down by picturing the way his room would look once a werewolf ate him and scattered the bones and gristly bits on the floor.

Lupin helped him push his chest of drawers in front of his door. It was heavy, but Lupin was apparently much stronger than he looked. Draco did not find this even a little bit soothing.

"Sure you had that Potion?" Draco inquired tensely. "It doesn't wear off, does it? Wouldn't you fancy another nice cup of it?"

"It's all right, Draco," Professor Lupin told him wearily, and then doubled up and screamed.

Draco screamed too, going backwards so fast he'd hit the wall before he realised, and his back was aching, but he kept working his shoulderblades as if he could dig his way out of brick with his back, his harsh breathing was tearing the world ragged around him, he couldn't see for panic, only he could see too much. Lupin was screaming, his head thrown back now, and his face and chest were moving, bones crunching and shifting, into a monster.

Draco took a deep breath and a flying leap at his wardrobe, scrambling on top of it, and then knocked his head against the ceiling craning to get a better view of the werewolf.

There was howling from outside the door, almost human voices mimicking werewolf howls with Fenrir's mad laugh topping them, and then the howls were turning animal, and mingled with screams, and this was his home and the animals had overrun it. Draco's furious resentment was going to take over as soon as he stopped shaking.

The werewolf was at the foot of the wardrobe, staring up at Draco with empty wolf eyes. If

Professor Lupin was in there, the eyes were not the windows to the soul and everyone had lied, because Lupin looked just like a wolf, an enormous wolf with sharp teeth and animal eyes.

He was not leaping. He just sat at the foot of the wardrobe, unblinking gaze fixed on Draco, and Draco slid his hand into the chest pocket of his robes and curled his hand hard around his wand. He tried to get his breathing under control because it was hurting his throat, and his eyes felt dry because he could not look away from the werewolf. He lay curled on top of the wardrobe, his stomach twisting with terror, and listened to the wolves baying through his house, through his Father's house, and he knew things had to change.

A body hurled itself against the door and when Draco screamed it growled, a sound that sent the door and Draco shuddering, and then the werewolf at the foot of Draco's wardrobe growled too. There was an almost considering pause from behind the door, and then silence.

Draco held hard onto his wand and scrubbed at his wet face. Someone had to control the werewolves, Fenrir had been on the loose for years, but he was the Dark Lord's now. The Dark Lord had power over him, he could solve the problem the Ministry could not.

This nightmare would be over soon, and everything would be better.

Mother came home that morning, and they were both so tired that they curled up on a sofa together, Draco's bones aching from finally moving out of the huddled shape on top of the wardrobe. She stroked his hair, being wildly demonstrative for Mother, and when he turned to look at her he saw her face. It must have been a trick of his tear-smudged glasses, but she almost looked as if she had been crying too.

"Everything will be all right," she whispered to him again, her voice like steel.

"I know," said Draco. Everything was becoming clearer and clearer. Something needed to be done.

That was when he remembered hearing the Inquisitorial Squad talking about what the Sociopath Twins had done to Montague, and remembered that cabinet. His mother was sleeping by then and he did not move, he did not want to disturb her, all he did was clench a triumphant fist against his leg, and then start stroking her hair.

*

When Professor Lupin came limping painfully down the stairs, his face white as a sheet, Mother took a long look at him and Draco knew she was schooling her face not to betray her distaste.

Then she said, "Thank you."

Lupin gave her an even more exhausted smile than usual. "It was my pleasure."

Then they all went downstairs to the kitchen because the manor was in such a state Mother did not want to sit in any of her good rooms and see what werewolves had done to her carpet. Draco made tea for everyone, but really mostly for Professor Lupin. He was starting to think

Professor Lupin had a disturbing tea fetish.

Lupin might have a tea fetish, but Draco had an intact jugular and a plan. Mother seemed happier, too, and the light was streaming through the windows and everything was going to be all right.

"Tell me," Draco said, because he was quite sure these people would not instantly dob him in, "why does the Dark Lord's face look like that?"

Lupin's face went completely blank but Mother answered casually: "I believe it's to do with living forever."

"He did it to himself?" Draco demanded, and at Mother's nod he smirked at them over the teapot. "You know, with no nose and red eyes, I bet he hasn't had any love in a long time," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe it just seems like he's living forever."

Lupin smiled, forgetting to be so tired for a moment, and Mother looked perfectly horrified.

"Do not let Bella hear you talk like that!" She smiled her hostess' smile as Draco poured the tea. "Professor Lupin has been telling me how good your essays were in third year."

"I tell you my essays are brilliant every year," Draco protested. "Specially that one, remember, I did a dramatic reading-"

"It's nice to hear it from the teachers," Mother said. "I wish that frightful man would arrange some kind of interaction between parents and teachers, I hear the Montagues' poor child was missing for days before they were contacted-"

"I could run the school better than he could," Draco suggested. "I think I would be a brilliant Headmaster. I would have a staff made of gold and be called Headmaster Malfoy and rule with justice and wisdom and cane all the people who were stupid at me. How many sugars, Professor Lupin?"

"I'd like two," said Professor Lupin, who would clearly have loved four.

"My friend Anthony says they have teacher and student meetings in the Muggle world," Draco said without thinking, and then when his mother stared he said hastily, "Very keen on Muggle Studies, Anthony."

It was not exactly a lie.

Professor Lupin, who Draco imagined knew perfectly well that Anthony Goldstein was Muggleborn, said thoughtfully: "Yes, I remember."

Draco put six sugars in Professor Lupin's tea and then gave it to him.

"Anthony," Mother said, delicately interrogating.

"Mother, no," Draco exclaimed. "No, really, I won't have you talking about my love life. Parents can't know anything about their children's love lives: it is a law. If you did know

things my head would explode like a teakettle with a firecracker in it."

"I merely asked," said Mother.

At that point Draco seized the teakettle and began to fly it around, making screeching and popping sounds as he imagined a firecracker would. Mother and Lupin were laughing at him a bit, and then he was surprised by a bark of laughter from the door.

He spun around, thinking it was Fenrir, but the rusty disused sound belonged to his Aunt Bellatrix. She came in and poured herself a cup of tea. "What are we talking about?"

"Me being headmaster," Draco replied promptly, feeling Aunt Bellatrix already knew far too much about his love life.

Aunt Bellatrix tilted her head to one side, and smiled a wild but very charming smile. "You can be. Once we're through with you, Draco, you can be anything you like."

"I think if I were headmaster, I would have to grow my hair," Draco said thoughtfully. "That looks wise."

He had a tea towel on his head and was doing a Professor Dumbledore impression when Fenrir walked in and he whisked it off and wished he really was a million trillion years old like horrible Dumbledore.

"Aw, how sweet, a family tea party," Fenrir cooed. "Mummy, auntie, baby and their pet dog. Shame you didn't come out to play last night, Draco. We could've had... fun."

Draco felt himself blanch, and heard the low, rising growl from Lupin. Mother's eyes had narrowed.

"You know," Aunt Bellatrix said, drawing her wand with a flourish, "I'm getting very tired of seeing you victimise my nephew."

Mother rose and Aunt Bellatrix rose with her, and for a moment they stood with their lids lowered and their wands drawn, like a a matched set, a photograph and its negative just poised to move. They looked like the Black sisters in that moment, like they were meant to stand together, and Draco suddenly knew how much Mother must have missed that.

"Meant no offence," Fenrir said, backing up a step.

Lupin growled again, deeper, and when Fenrir glared he innocently sipped his tea. Werewolf with a cuppa, nothing to see here.

"Cissy, will an Unforgivable spoil your kitchen?" Bellatrix inquired considerably.

Fenrir retreated and Draco beamed around at all of them. This was what the Dark Lord was about: stronger people banding together to make the world better and control everything that was going wild. Nobody had ever stood up to Moody for him.

Draco knew he'd made the right choice.

*

Occlumency lessons kept going brilliantly, because Draco was obviously a very great genius. He was able to block his mind completely from Aunt Bellatrix's by the third lesson, and on the fourth lesson he was able to throw Legilimens hard enough to crash into her mind for a moment.

All he saw was a dark handsome man who was obviously not his Uncle Rodolphus, and the fat face of some woman who looked a little like Neville Longbottom.

"Oh, the brat's your age, is he?" Aunt Bellatrix asked. "What do you think of him?"

Draco shrugged. "He's an idiot."

Bellatrix smiled. "His parents were blood traitors, and they deserved everything they got."

He had no idea Longbottom's parents had received anything, and he did not want to know about anything Aunt Bellatrix had done. He heard her screaming in her sleep some nights, heard his mother hurry into her room to wake her from dreams of Azkaban.

Only the knowledge that the Dementors had left Azkaban - because the Dark Lord was more in control than the Ministry, just as Draco had thought - stopped Draco from leaving the house and somehow finding a way to Hogwarts to kill Dumbledore at once, to get his father out of that place.

"Where's Uncle Rodolphus staying?" he asked, to check his aunt was not involved in any scandalous love affairs beside the one in her head with the Dark Lord.

"How should I know?" Aunt Bellatrix responded, looking irritable. "I was married to him for four years of war, and then had to listen to him dribble and moan for fourteen years more. I'm back with my family now - I don't need a keepsake from Azkaban."

She looked at Draco and Draco wondered why Aunt Bellatrix always looked starved, even though Mother made sure she ate. She leaned forward and pushed the hair from Draco's brow.

"You're doing remarkably," she said. "I wish I had a son like you, to give into the service of my Lord."

Draco put a cautious arm around her, because he thought her crazy talk meant love. She was right, after all: they were family. In comparison, nothing else mattered.

"You let some things slip, those first few times," Aunt Bellatrix said in his ear, and he thought of Potter and almost had a panic attack. "That girl Hermione," she went on. "She looked familiar - and she's a Mudblood, isn't she?"

Draco went cold.

"Don't think I blame you for a moment," murmured Aunt Bellatrix, sounding almost like his

mother, but warmer. "You were placed in that atrocious school, surrounded by the wrong sort when you were an impressionable child. They're tricky, those Mudbloods, sometimes they do seem just like us, that's why they're even more dangerous than the Muggles. You're a little too soft, Draco, you became fond of a couple of them, that's all. Your breeding won out. You made the right choice."

The worry he was going to be asked to cut off Hermione's head the next time he saw her relieved, Draco relaxed a little further against Aunt Bellatrix.

"We're not going to kill them all, you know," Aunt Bellatrix murmured. He looked at her quickly and she said: "Of course not, there are billions of them. It would be a waste. We just need to set our rules and weed out the rebels, put Our Master on the throne to change the world. And which Mudbloods more likely to be shown mercy than the favourites of the Dark Lord's favourite, the one who removed a significant obstacle from his path?"

She sounded lazy and indulgent, as if she was promising him a treat, and not the lives of his friends. Draco closed his eyes and leaned against her, thought of Hermione's face just before she hit him. He could save her too, as well as Father.

He'd known he made the right choice.

*

"Did you know Sirius Black?" he asked Lupin the next time they had tea.

Lupin put down his cup. "He was a friend at school," he said quietly.

"You know he's..."

"Yes," said Lupin. "Yes, I know that."

Draco rattled around with the teacups and the sugar basin instead of continuing with this stupid conversation, but Lupin carried it on all by his stubborn werewolf self.

"Why do you ask?"

Draco looked at the kitchen surfaces. "Potter mentioned him," he mumbled.

Lupin clearly cheated by using super wolf powers to hear him. "Harry? Harry mentioned him to you?"

If Lupin persisted with this cruel interrogation, Draco was only going to put one spoon of sugar in his tea. "Yes," he said into the cups. "He said - on the train home this year, he said I'd never get the chance to know him now."

He thought of the rattling train and Potter's eyes gleaming with tears, without the haze of rage he had experienced the first few dozen times around.

"He said that," Lupin said, giving Draco an odd look. "You two are getting on better these days, then?"

Draco had an extremely ill-timed and vivid flashback to the incident of insanity. He banged the sugar basin and spoon about some more and felt his ears burn. He hoped to God Lupin did not notice, damn Potter anyway. He thought everyone else were such little unimportant people, clearly boys were to be used as a sort of practice kit until he was ready for girls.

"He hates me," Draco answered. "He always hated me, remember?"

Lupin's mouth twisted. "He didn't mention it so often after the mudfight incident. Apparently you - didn't turn him in to Snape, or something?"

"Hermione would've had my head," Draco muttered, and compromised by maliciously only adding three spoonfuls of sugar to Lupin's tea. He handed it over and hoped sugar-light tea added sorrow to Lupin's wretched werewolf life.

Once he was sitting across the table from Lupin, he thought an adroit segue from things that were very much his own business was appropriate.

"You liked Potter," he said. "I remember that. In a shocking turn of events in this world where everyone is obsessed with his mop-headed loathsomeness, he was teacher's pet. Doesn't it bother you that-?"

Draco stopped and had some tea.

Lupin laced his fingers around his cup. "It does bother me," he agreed. "I liked Harry very much. I would have loved him, if - his parents had lived, if things had worked out. Only it bothered me to be around him. In the end, he was too painful a reminder of a world I lost, and then I had no job, I knew I would have no job under the Ministry's rule, and a lifetime going hungrier than I have already gone did not seem worth it, just for the sake of some old memories that hurt."

"Besides, he'd probably hate you if he knew everything you'd done," Draco said, thinking of how judgemental Potter always was, how they had both gone too far already, and then he saw the look on Lupin's face and he realised Terry would not have considered that a sensitive comment.

"He would have every right," Professor Lupin said, and he sounded so tired.

Draco made a restless movement, unsure of what to do, and knocked over his teacup. Tea went everywhere and Lupin started to laugh. "Sometimes," he added, "you remind me very much of your first cousin."

Draco looked up from his efforts to salvage his mother's tablecloth from death-by-tea. "You must be thinking of someone else," he said, blinking. "I don't have a first cousin."

Lupin leaned forward. "Draco," he said in a low voice, "It's very easy for Harry to dismiss evil as inhuman, and to view people he has no sympathy with as evil. That is why I was pleased he seemed - less inclined to dismiss you in third year, since you have a very different-"

The word dismiss stung enough for Draco to interrupt with a short, bitter laugh. "Well, you were wrong. He's always dismissed me."

"Your situation," Lupin said softly, "is quite different. Evil is almost always human. You can live with evil, laugh with evil, undiluted evil is very hard to find, but irredeemable evil is not. Listen to me, Draco-

"Draco," Aunt Bellatrix said from the door, "it's time for your Occlumency lesson."

Draco grinned an apology and left Lupin with the rest of the mess. Professor Lupin wasn't so bad, Draco thought: he didn't deserve to be starved to death. They should not let him be a teacher or anything, what if he got too complacent and forgot his Potion, but Draco thought they should let him be a librarian if he would promise to lock himself up in a cellar every full moon and not chew on the books.

Sensible people like Lupin and Professor Snape were Death Eaters. It was the only choice.

Draco rubbed nervously at his left wrist and Aunt Bellatrix caught him at it. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he said guiltily.

"We'd best get on with Occlumency, then. I mentioned how talented you are at a meeting the other day," she added. As Draco subtly, coolly preened himself on being a complete genius, she said: "I'd watch out for Severus Snape, if I were you. He likes you, but he was a little miffed - he's used to being the Occlumens prodigy, and he's jealous that you have been trusted with such an important job, at your age. He might want to steal some of your glory."

Prodigy, Draco repeated to himself, and tried to keep his smirk to acceptable levels. Then he said, "Wait - what? I like Professor Snape!"

Aunt Bellatrix lifted one shoulder. "Perhaps I am wrong."

Later that day, Draco sat on Mother's bed and watched her do her hair. "Do you like Professor Snape?" he blurted, and saw her raise her eyebrows in the glass.

"Yes, I do. Very much. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing," Draco muttered. "No reason. That's what I thought."

His mother continued to watch him in the mirror. He saw his own reflection in the mirror, and he looked smaller and unhappier than he imagined himself.

"If Professor Snape gives you any advice," Mother said suddenly, "Take it. He wants to help you, he know you're still very young-

Draco curled in tighter on himself. "I'm not a child."

She thought he was weak, and that he could not be trusted, but he wasn't. He had made his decision, he was going to save his father, and she would see then, and she would be so happy.

She'd be proud of him, then.

Aunt Bellatrix had told him about Regulus, as well. Draco knew what happened to people who were weak enough to lose their nerve when they had chosen the right path and found it difficult. It was the same thing that happened to people who betrayed their family and lived cut off from them in order to win the love of people like Harry Potter.

They died.

Draco was going to be stronger than that.

*

With the summer days growing shorter, the time when Draco was going to have to effect his plans came closer. It was perfectly normal to be nervous, he was sure even Father was a little nervous before every great political victory.

He did what he knew, and studied. The books available at home did not have as wide a range as Hogwarts library, but there were a few volumes that would have been in the Restricted Section at school. Draco found a few things on the Come and Go Room.

For instance, if you took an object which belonged to the room outside the room, you could control what happened inside it to an extent. If Potter or someone came sneaking around, Draco thought it would be extremely amusing to present him with an empty room, and then perhaps remove the door for a bit.

Aunt Bellatrix got restless when he spent too long reading, and asked him if he wanted to learn some terrible Dark curses. Draco gave her a look over his glasses for being unappreciative of serious research, but agreed after a while that terrible Dark curses might come in handy.

"I can't believe you don't play Quidditch," Aunt Bellatrix said after Draco successfully turned a frog upside down in the air and left it hanging.

"Yes, Harry Potter, but why do you look so alarmingly like my aunt?" Draco asked.

Aunt Bellatrix looked at him as if he was crazy, which was a little bit like the frog looking at him as if he was green.

"I liked Quidditch in school," she said suddenly, as if she had just remembered. "I was a Beater."

"I'll bet you were."

"Of course, I was in Slytherin," Aunt Bellatrix added.

Draco could not imagine the Sorting Hat placing her anywhere else. Everything else aside, he imagined that if Aunt Bellatrix had thought the outcome was in doubt she would have held down the brim in two tight fists and growled, 'Don't make me choke a bitch.'

He smiled at the thought, and at Aunt Bellatrix.

"Levicorpus is very useful when you already have the rope around their neck," Aunt Bellatrix said thoughtfully, her eyes caught by the frog, and she put an absent arm around Draco's shoulders.

Draco thought suddenly of Lupin saying, Undiluted evil is very hard to find, but irredeemable evil is not.

Draco turned his face into his aunt's shoulder. Lupin had obviously meant to warn him against Fenrir Greyback.

He was in the bookroom again when Mother came in and proposed that they go to Diagon Alley and pick up his things. Mother had not gone to Diagon Alley with him since first year, because she said the place was always crammed with vulgar shopkeepers and low company. Father had always gone with him, and neither Draco nor Mother mentioned that at all. They looked at each other and knew it.

The continuing ache of Father's absence was not the only problem. Draco had been rather counting on shopping by himself, so he could pick up a few needful things in Knockturn Alley.

"You'll hate it, Mother. I'll be fine by myself, I'm practically seventeen, you know."

"I want to go," Mother lied. "I am sure rubbing shoulders with bargain hunters will be tremendous fun."

"The sociopathic Weasley twins quit school in the middle of the year and started up their own business in Diagon Alley," Draco informed her rebelliously.

Mother smiled at him. "Draco, tell me. Why are you talking about the behaviour of ill-disciplined rabble as if it has any relevance to our lives?"

That was apparently that, and they were set to go to Diagon Alley together.

*

Diagon Alley was very different, with purple Wanted posters of his aunt plastered on every surface. Draco felt as if this would not be happening if Father was there with him.

He conceded that even Father would not have been able to stop this woman who called herself a tailor from mistaking him for a pincushion and ruining his dark-blue dress robes. Draco had chosen the colour to show support for his house, and he was starting to have dire doubts about them bringing out shadows under his eyes.

He ignored this important and pressing concern while he tried very hard to get Mother to go and have a refreshing lemon ice while he did the rest of his shopping by himself.

"The ice-cream shop is closed, Draco, didn't you notice?" Mother asked.

"They say the Death Eaters got Florian Fortescue," the shop-busybody said in tones of sepulchral satisfaction.

Mother and Draco both gave her a quelling look. Mother had more experience, but Draco had his glasses. The woman subsided, overcome on all fronts.

Draco resumed persuasion. "Look, I'm a Ravenclaw, I can buy my own books. I'm not a child, in case you hadn't noticed, Mother."

The woman clearly did not learn, because she started a homily on how none of them were safe wandering alone. Draco thought about how safe it was in his own home, and he shivered and the woman stabbed him again.

"Watch where you're sticking that pin, will you!"

If she practised voodoo, she should have set up shop in Knockturn Alley, Draco thought crossly, pulling himself away from her pins and her evil reaching hands. Freed from the toils of her voodoo tailoring, he went over to a mirror and checked carefully to see if his dark suspicions about the shadows under his eyes were true.

After a few moments, he realised that Potter, Hermione and Weasley were standing behind him. Him and Potter in the robe shop again, he thought with a nasty little shock. To complete this moment, he even had Oafy stationed outside. Nothing over the years had changed, except now Potter had collected himself a minion and Draco's Hermione, and Draco was not going to make any effort at polite conversation.

He and Potter stared at each other for another moment, and then he called out: "You were quite right about meeting low company in Diagon Alley, Mother. A Weasley just walked in."

Potter frowned and Weasley went for his wand, and Hermione, who had been slightly behind them, reached out to stop Weasley. Which was when Draco saw her face.

He was across the room in a second, his hand under her chin. "Who blacked your eye?" he demanded. "I'll kill them."

Hermione looked up at him, and he saw the set expression on her face soften.

Weasley shoved him. "Don't you touch her!"

For a horrifying instant, Draco was grateful to Weasley. He couldn't afford to be distracted, Hermione was too clever, she might suspect and she would not understand. She would see one day that it had helped to save her life, and until then - Weasley would protect her, he wouldn't get distracted by heroics like Potter might be. He supposed he could be grateful to Weasley for keeping her safe for him.

"Ah, I see how it is," he said. "You two had a little fight. Opened her smart mouth one too many times, did she? Getting a bit of violence in before the domestic part?"

Hermione and Weasley both went red, and Weasley went for his wand again. Potter grabbed Draco's arm.

"Stop it," he said softly - he thought he could command anyone, like he thought he could grab anyone, apparently. "That's not funny."

Mother stepped out from behind the clothes rack, and Draco saw her look at them, and saw the fear that had been haunting her all summer pass swiftly over her face, leaving it blank and tight-lipped.

"I suggest that you put your wand away and that you take your hands off Draco," she said icily. "If you attack my son, I shall ensure that it is the last thing you ever do."

Potter glared at her, and Draco saw it was just as he had thought. Potter knew Mother had handed over Sirius Black, and Mother - she was only worried about him...

"Want to Owl one of your Death Eater friends and tell them where to find me?" Potter asked. "That's your usual style, isn't it?"

Madam Maladroit Behaviour was squawking like a distressed chicken, but all Draco was really aware of was Mother's pale face and Potter's low, dangerous voice.

"I wouldn't need any friends to - dispose of you," Mother said, her lips still thin and her eyes still on Draco. "Let go of him."

"Try it," Potter invited her. "I'm sure you'll really enjoy Azkaban."

That clear reference to Father made Draco step forward, sense taking a short vacation as blood rang in his ears, to wipe that smug look off Potter's face somehow.

Because no good ever came of incidents in Draco's life that involved robe shops and Potter, he actually tripped over his overlong robes. For a moment he wanted to stumble right off a cliff and away from the shameful pain of life.

Potter's grip on his arm went hard, automatically steadying him, which made the humiliation even worse.

"You heard my mother," Draco spat. "Let go of me, you can't keep my arm as a trophy."

Potter looked at Draco's left arm, and some emotion turned his green eyes very dark indeed. Draco was suddenly and terribly aware of the place on his arm where the Dark Mark could have been, just cloth between the leering snake and Potter's fingers. He flinched and Potter's hand, not relaxing its grip at all, slid down to his wrist. His fingers were callused, rough on the inside of Draco's wrist, and his intent was clear: he was going to look for-

Draco yanked his arm savagely away.

"Mother," he said, trying to force his voice not to shake with fury, "I don't think I want these any more-"

He made to yank the stupid blue robes over his head.

"Malfoy, you're wearing something under that, aren't you?" Potter asked, going dark red.

Draco stared at him in amazement. "You're extremely weird and creepy," he informed him, and pulled the robes off. Naturally, he was wearing black robes underneath: as if he would let a shopkeeper see him in the altogether, let alone (and God forbid) Weasley.

He threw the robes at Potter's feet and pulled his disarranged collar together, feeling obscurely uncomfortable, and drew tight against his mother's side. She put her hand in his and held on so hard he knew she had been actually afraid for him.

"I think we will do better in Twilfitt and Tatting's," Mother announced with decision, as the tradeswoman twittered indignantly. She raised her eyebrow at Potter. "What very unfortunate hair you have, dear," she said smoothly. "It's a wonder your mother lets you out looking like that. Oh, wait, I forgot-"

She lifted a hand in mock dismay to her mouth. Draco did not have to look to know that Potter was looking murderous. He thought suddenly of the Dark Lord saying, I might count the entire Malfoy clan as a dead loss... and shuddered, holding her hand tighter as they left the shop.

Mother let herself tremble once, when she was sure they were out of sight. "That brat should have died when he was a year old," she said coldly. "Then we would not be in this mess, then Lucius would be at home and you would be safe-"

Her face smoothed at once when she caught sight of Mrs Zabini, a particular friend of hers, who she greeted with an air kiss on each cheek and told her summer had been tolerable. Mrs Zabini launched into a frankly embarrassing story about her fifth summer of sexual discovery to date.

After ten minutes, Draco judged his mother was sufficiently involved in the story, and his slow backing away became an outright run, out of sight, past the Sociopath Twins' Super Sadism shop, and towards his goal of Knockturn Alley.

He had made his choice - the right choice - and made a plan. Now was the time to carry it out.

Chapter Eight

Mother didn't really talk to him on the journey to the train station. She sat in the carriage opposite him looking pale and beautiful and a hundred cool miles away from him, and Draco wanted Father to criticise him, or Aunt Bella to ramble lovingly about decapitation in his ear, or something.

"Take care, Draco," she said on the platform, and touched his sleeve. He stared at her.

Then a tall woman with the build of a carthorse and wire-rimmed spectacles and 'Muggle' written all over her strode up to them and said, "Hello, I'm Pamela Goldstein. Our boys are such good friends: I thought you and I should get acquainted."

Draco and his mother stared at her with varying degrees of shock and horror. Then Mother, manners impeccable as usual, held out her hand and said in a faint, colourless tone: "Charmed, I'm sure."

Pamela Oh My God A Muggle Is Touching My Mother Goldstein smiled and Anthony peeped out from over her shoulder, looking embarrassed but in a normal parent way, as if there were no social conventions, no taboos, being horribly defied as they spoke.

"And this is little Draco," Pamela said, smiling at him cheerfully. "He's a cute kid. Looks a bit anaemic, though."

"I am sixteen years old," Draco informed her, "And tall. Tall for my age. And I have a - refined complexion."

"Anthony's right, you can tell he was homeschooled," Pamela said, elbowing Narcissa in the ribs. Mother looked on the point of death by scandalized dismay. "He should take iron pills."

"I thank you for your kind recommendation, but in the wizarding world we are not accustomed to medicating our children with metal," Mother said stiffly.

"How was your summer?" Anthony asked.

Draco thought of the Dark Lord's red eyes and the werewolves prowling his house and his Aunt Bellatrix talking about the best way to torture the Muggleborn to death. Filthy halfbreeds, she'd said once. Diluting our blood. It won't stop unless we make it stop.

She'd also said, which Mudbloods more likely to be shown mercy than the favourites of the Dark Lord's favourite?

Draco looked at Anthony's friendly, inquiring face and said, "Fine."

"So Draco's a homosexual," Pamela said. "I think that's so interesting, I always wanted Anthony to have artistic friends. Besides, really, making boys wear dresses and play with brooms in their formative years is bound to leave a mark. Have you joined PFLAG?"

"I'm afraid I do not quite understand you," said Narcissa's mouth, and her eyes said "you

terrible, incomprehensible woman."

"Mum, stop," Anthony pleaded.

"Oh hush, Anthony. Draco's not embarrassed! Are you embarrassed, Draco?"

"I only wish I was dead a little bit," Draco said, for Anthony's sake. "Oh, listen, did you hear the train - it's leaving, we'll be very late, must dash, imperative that we be in our places and - commence studying at once! For we are Ravenclaws, and that is what Ravenclaws do."

"Don't you think that the division between houses in this school promotes a sort of gang mentality?" inquired Pamela Goldstein. "I find it most psychologically peculiar. It's almost like the loyalties in the Mob."

"My child is not part of any sort of mob," Mother said with dignity. "If you're going, Draco, take care of yourself - mind you write," and her hand trembled a little on his sleeve.

Draco wanted to hug her, but surely she would have hugged him if she'd wanted to, and Anthony and his mother were watching.

"I'll write," he said. "Don't fuss, Mother."

"Naturally I shall be somewhat concerned," Mother responded, and then smiled and let go of his sleeve.

Draco turned away, and turning saw her cool smile go all out of shape. He whirled back and hugged her, her back thin under his hands. He was almost taller than her now, his mother, and she'd always been lovely and cold and perhaps fragile as an ice sculpture: it was Father you could count on to be interested in you, even if he was disappointed. She put a hand on his shoulder, returned his embrace cautiously, and Draco burrowed his face against her, glasses pushed into her shoulder.

"It'll be fine, Mother," he told her, "it'll be fine, fine, I'll take care of everything."

"You don't have to," Mother said.

She didn't know, of course. She had no idea that the Dark Lord had said, I believe I might count the entire Malfoy clan as... a dead loss. Draco did have to take care of everything, including her, but he would, he could, it was an honour and everything would be all right.

She would never have to know. Draco was going to protect her.

He kissed her cheek, glasses bumping against her cheekbone, and then stepped back and avoided her eyes. "You needn't worry, I have everything under control," he assured her, and then he and Anthony ascended the steps into the train.

Behind him he heard Mrs Goldstein say: "Do you frequently have bouts of separation anxiety?" and his mother murmur: "I do apologise, I have an appointment to - have an appointment, excuse me."

"Thanks for gossiping with your mother about my love life, Anthony Goldstein," Draco said severely as he dragged his trunk along the corridors. He wasn't getting stuck talking to Loony Lovegood this year. "You total old biddy at sixteen, you."

"I needed to work things out," Anthony said cheerfully and unrepentantly. "Because you and Terry were all close and the break-up is going to impact on the dynamic of our friendship, which is a serious emotional issue for me even though my interest in the matter is strictly platonic. The homosocial bonds we develop in school and their outcome affect us for life, Mum says."

"You're really weird, I just thought you should know," Draco informed him.

"I want there to be as little conflict as possible," said Anthony, "but of course if it comes down to it I'm on your side."

"Are you," Draco said, blankly. "Why?"

"Because we're closer than Terry and I are, of course," Anthony said. "You know where you are with you: you always speak your mind. Anyway you're a big spaz, and I empathise with that."

Draco had always assumed that Terry was better friends with the entire dorm than Draco was: Terry had tact, and he'd been made prefect, and Entwistle and Corner certainly liked him best, imbeciles that they were, so it seemed to make sense that the third in their group liked Terry best too. He had Crabbe and Goyle to like him best, anyway, he was in the habit of telling himself.

Apparently not just them, though. He favoured Anthony with a warm smile.

"Where're we going to sit, then," Anthony said. "Every year I get scared I'll end up sitting with Loony Lovegood. I still have nightmares from that time she told me about Snorkacks, you know. I told Mother I think she's verbally harassing me."

"I'll verbally harass you, Goldstein, you enormous baby," Draco said.

Pansy waved to him from down the train corridor and came up with Crabbe trundling both his and her bags. She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. Draco sometimes thought she fancied him: probably on account of his animal magnetism.

He tried to give her the glasses look in an alluring way, recalled that animals didn't wear spectacles at all, and fell into some confusion.

"Let's go find a carriage," she said, taking his arm. "D'you have something in your eye?" She looked slight askance at Anthony, clearly bent on accompanying them, and extreme askance at his amulet.

"I know," Anthony told her. "I'm a filthy Muggleborn. You can degrade me and crush my spirit by making me your sex slave if you like."

Pansy laughed and said: "Clearly, Anthony Goldstein, you are reading far too much Witches

Gone Wild."

Goyle's look of incredible guilt was lost on nobody. Draco happened to know that sometimes he cut his comics out of their covers and hid Witches Gone Wild inside them.

They all went and found a compartment. Getting the trunks onto the racks was hard work if women were being lazy and not pulling their own weight, and afterwards Draco collapsed artistically with his head in Pansy's lap. She stroked his hair amiably enough and called him a gigantic baby.

"Oh, you want me bad," said Draco.

"I'll tell you who I want bad," Pansy told them all. "Anybody seen Potter yet? The summer did him a lot of good - he's so tall."

"I'm tall," Draco put in, offended and shocked.

"And he's so tanned," Pansy went on, at which point Draco lapsed into grouchy but no less horrified silence. "I saw him on the platform wearing one of those sloppy jumpers and I wanted to pour honey on the golden hollow of his throat and then lick it off."

There was a pause, indicative of the fact that everyone thought Pansy should stop reading Wizards Gone Wild.

"I want to be sick," Draco said at last.

"Potter is nice enough," Anthony said, and Draco levered himself up on one elbow to give him the Not Sexy Glasses Look of Reproach because he was a Traitor, "but I've never had any - breakfast spread thoughts about him. I have to say."

"Pity Chang says he's the worst kisser she's ever kissed and can't string two words together," Pansy said. "If he had any sort of acceptable personality at all, I would ride him like a wild pony all night long."

There was a long pause. Draco wrenched his mind away from ponies tamed or untamed, and concentrated on the deliriously amusing Cho revelations.

"You know," he said at length, "In many ways, Cho Chang is the love of my life. What else did she say about Potter?"

"I think she was wrong about Potter, though," Pansy said thoughtfully. "He said more than two words to me. He asked if I'd seen you."

"Yes," Draco said, "because he lives to torment me."

"And to battle You-Know-Who," Anthony put in brightly. A distinctly uneasy silence fell until Anthony went on: "And I bet he's Quidditch captain this year."

Before Anthony and Pansy started filling out forms to join Colin Creevey's Harry Potter Fan Club and receive the photograph-filled newsletter, Blaise Zabini came into the compartment

and crashed about apparently having trouble with the door. Draco was slightly more concerned with the flash of movement in the corner of his eye after Blaise swung the door open.

For a moment he thought he'd imagined it, but then he caught Anthony's eye and saw Anthony'd spotted it too.

They looked at the luggage rack and nodded to each other. Then they nodded to Crabbe and Goyle, who since third year had periodically leaped at empty air and shouted 'Got you, Potter!' as it was. Then he gently elbowed Pansy.

"I expect Slughorn would've invited me," Draco said in a clear, carrying voice; "if some complete bastard hadn't got my father arrested."

There was shifty silence from the luggage rack.

"Which is to say that the Ravenclaws are quick-witted and keen-eyed and we've totally spotted you, Potter," Draco said, more loudly. "Come out of there, you're embarrassing us all."

Taking his sweet time about it, Potter did so, and he removed the Invisibility Cloak and looked around in a blushy but determined sort of way. Draco examined him: he supposed he was taller and browner and stuff, but his mere presence in the world was a complete offence. And Draco would have been invited to Slughorn's get-together if it hadn't been for Potter, Father would still have the position he deserved, everything would be all right. Potter had ruined Draco's life and didn't even care, and the only thing Draco wanted to do with him was tear him apart with his bare hands.

"I didn't know you had an Invisibility Cloak," Zabini said at length. "That's pretty cool."

"Thanks, Zambini," said Potter.

"Zambini?" said Zabini: Potter wasn't paying attention.

"So," he said. "So - here you are, Malfoy. With - you know, on the train. With Pansy Parkinson," he added, for some reason.

Mad. He was mad.

He was mad but clearly he suspected something, clearly Draco'd given himself away somehow before school had even properly started. Draco was horrified and appalled at himself, and - and not afraid, but uncomfortable. He didn't... Anthony shouldn't hear from Potter, he wouldn't understand. Later, once it was done. Draco would think of something.

He sat up, even though Pansy's stroking his hair had been very soothing and therapeutic, because he was already at quite enough of a miserable disadvantage with Potter without addressing him while lying flat on his back.

"Well spotted," Draco observed. "Why're we being graced with this enormous invasion of privacy, Potter?"

"I want to," Potter said. "I want to talk to you."

"Oh really? I was under the impression that you wanted to spy on me from a luggage rack," Draco snapped.

"Failing that," Potter said dryly, though he was still blushing ferociously. "I need to talk to you. Um, privately."

"And if wishes were horses then Weasleys would ride," Draco sneered, and then thought, ride, and also, wild ponies, and entirely lost his train of thought and damned Pansy Parkinson to hell.

"Are you blushing, Malfoy?" Potter asked uneasily.

"No!" Draco snapped. "You're blushing!"

It was true: the idiot was scarlet under his stupid tan, and still not leaving.

"I'm not leaving," Potter told him mulishly, as if Draco could not see that perfectly well.

"Since you're the Chosen One now and everything," Draco commented, "You'd think you'd be able to find some people who might choose to be in your company."

"Oh shut up, Malfoy," Potter said.

Draco was deeply dismayed that he actually had the words "You shut up" on his lips before he remembered he wasn't eleven years old anymore. He decided that the really mature way to handle this was to ignore Potter totally and proceed to give him the silent treatment.

He went back to lying with his head in Pansy's lap. She was a kind girl, she had lovely soft hands even if she did have terrible horrible taste in men.

Potter sat down and Crabbe and Goyle moved over as far as they could and gave him funny looks from the corner of their eyes. Potter crossed his arms over his chest and his legs at the ankles, with all appearance of settling in. Draco could not believe him: he was the most stubborn and unmannerly person in the world.

"So, how was your summer, Potter?" Anthony asked at last.

Potter blinked. "It was okay. I spent it with the Weasleys," he said. "How was, um, your summer?"

"It was great. I went to a Young Psychologists' Camp," Anthony confided enthusiastically.

Potter blinked and said, "Cool," in a rather unconvinced way.

There was another long silence, broken only by Zabini muttering "Zambini" under his breath, and Goyle getting out his comic book again. Everyone was more or less just staring at Potter, who had gone a dull red. He clearly suspected something, maybe he'd tracked Draco down to

Borgin and Burkes in that damned Cloak. Anyway he was staring at Draco, he needn't think he was going to break Draco's nerve, no matter how much Potter looked like he wouldn't leave until he got what he wanted.

"So what did you want to talk to Draco about?" Anthony asked, frowning.

Draco despised himself completely, because he cast a pleading look at Potter, and Potter looked startled.

"Um," he said. "Stuff."

Pansy's fingers were gentle in Draco's hair. Maybe he should marry her for daily head massages. "Are you going to just sit here glaring at all of us and being incoherent all journey long?" she inquired.

"Maybe," Potter shot back. "Are you going to just sit there all journey long grooming Malfoy and looking smug about it, as if anyone would-"

He stopped. Draco had no idea, Potter was apparently too much of a freak to even talk properly anymore, he was just babbling gibberish like his Big Crazy Giant adopted father.

"Where's your boyfriend?" Potter asked suddenly, investing the word with a lot of hatred. Enormous hypocritical homophobe that he was.

"He's," Anthony began. Draco gave him a quelling look: there was no reason that Harry Potter needed to know that Draco had been ignominiously dumped.

"If you mean Terry Boot," he said coldly, "He's in the prefects' carriage. With, you know, the only two friends you have in the world?"

Potter glared at him. He thought about Hermione and felt sick and unhappy and glared back. They all just sat there. Not much farther, Draco told himself, but as the train jolted on and Potter just stayed there Draco felt himself getting angrier and angrier. Potter came snooping around after Draco, which was fine, they were enemies, Draco would be a Death Eater before long and show him, but to have the utter face to impose himself on Draco and all Draco's friends, fresh from an exclusive party with Slughorn where precious Potter was invited and disgraced Lucius Malfoy's son was not, and be rude to Pansy for no reason, and... He was just the limit.

Dad had been in Azkaban all summer while Potter had been reclining on the freckled bosom of the Weasleys and getting his stupid tan.

"How was," Potter said, and cleared his throat. "How was your summer, Malfoy?"

Draco turned his head and gave him a look of loathing. "How d'you think it was," he said icily.

The room went silent again. The atmosphere was extremely chilly. Potter looked away at last, but did not move an inch.

When the train finally pulled into the station, Anthony, Crabbe and Goyle almost killed each other trying to escape from the carriage at the same time. Pansy waited so Draco could scramble up and Zabini paused so he could say: "It's Blaise Zabini, all right? Blaise Zabini!"

Potter looked at him as if he was insane. "Okay," he said. "Whatever."

Then he said: "I only want a minute, Malfoy."

Calm settled on Draco, cool and logical. "All right," he answered. "All right."

He closed the doors on the retreating backs of the others, and then leaned against the door and took a deep breath. He heard Potter take a step behind him.

"Look, Malfoy," he said. "You're smarter than this."

"I'm smarter than you," Draco snapped, and whirled on him. "Petrificus Totalus!"

Potter went down hard, and Draco stooped over his frozen form to get in a good gloat.

"Now, Potter," he murmured. "You taught me to be quicker on the draw than that." He was about to proceed on this theme when he looked at Potter's face: it made him uncomfortable. "Stop looking at me like that," he said, and felt like an idiot.

Right. There was no point lingering, he should just do as he'd planned. Potter had put his father in prison and he was going to break Potter's nose and leave him there paralyzed. It would be fun. It would be revenge: Dad deserved that.

Stupid Godforsaken Potter had said last time they were on the train together, "You'll never get the chance to know him now. Like he minded that a Black was dead. Draco wondered how his summer had actually been.

Potter wouldn't have cared, if the Black in question hadn't turned his back on everything that made him a Black. Draco should stop being such a child, he wasn't a child, he could do this. For his father.

Draco glanced back at Potter, cursed and hit the wall. Then he just draped Potter's Invisibility Cloak over him.

"I don't reckon they'll find you until the train's back in London," he said, with all the frustrated malice he had. "See you around, Potter... or not."

He got up and rejoined the others on the platform. Anthony was apparently trying to chat up Pansy and she was staring at him blankly. When Draco appeared they both grinned at him.

"You were right," Pansy said. "Potter's good-looking, but he's an enormous weirdo. What the hell was he doing? Acting like you're the prime suspect in a murder investigation!"

Draco felt briefly cold.

Anthony cheered him up by saying: "I really hope that You-Know-Who doesn't have to be

defeated by stealth. Because Potter? Not stealth."

*

The Hat sang another song about the houses uniting, and Anthony talked wistfully about how much he'd like to unite with Pansy Parkinson.

"I thought you had a crush on Hermione," Draco said at last, saying her name to show he could.

"She's so stuck on Ron Weasley there might as well be glue involved," Anthony sighed. "Mother says I should move on. I like Slytherins," he went on dreamily. "They're sassy. Uh, not Greg and Vince, of course."

Terry was oddly quiet for most of the meal, not looking at Draco. Draco didn't care or told himself he didn't care, which was just as good, until Terry said: "Harry Potter's not here. Anthony said - what did you do to him?"

It was nice, that his ex-boyfriend and ex-best friend thought he was murdering people on trains. Really nice.

What was even nicer was that it had passed through Draco's mind, somewhere between sneering down at Potter and hitting the wall. It had made him feel sick, and he'd been too feeble even to break stupid Potter's stupid face for his father's sake.

Another thing making him feel sick was Dumbledore. The old man looked like death, looked aged another century to add to his millions of centuries, his face yellowy-grey, one of his hands a twisted ruin. He looked almost like an evil overlord as well now, but a frail one, decaying.

I could really do it, Draco thought, and felt a chill down his spine. He had to do it: for Father, for Mother, for himself. He had to.

Potter came in just before dessert was served, and Draco was gloomily unsurprised. Of course Potter was going to escape somehow, get out of his predicament in some unlikely hero way like he always did, forever come out on top.

Draco should've broken his nose when he had the chance. He scowled significantly at Terry, then scowled less significantly at the treacle tart.

To make himself feel better, he told Cho, Mandy and Lisa how he'd tricked Potter and covered him with the cloak. They were all laughing and reproaching him as he made his I Am Frozen Potter face, and then in the midst of it he saw Potter's eyes fixed on him, intent, like he wasn't going to give up or let Draco get away with it.

Draco shuddered and turned his face away. He didn't have time for Potter now.

When the night came, and he went to the Room of Requirement with the cabinet and looked at it, and looked at it, and had no idea what to do next, he knew he didn't have time for anything.

"What've you been doing?" Terry asked, when he got back to bed late.

"Oh, off killing Harry Potter as usual," Draco sneered, and turned away in bed. Last year Terry would have joined him.

This year Terry sighed, and turned out the light.

*

It seemed like the ideal solution when Professor Slughorn offered Felix Felicis as a prize for the winner of his little potion-making contest. Draco stopped whispering to Anthony and evading Potter's fixed gaze, and felt his heart beat in his throat. If he could win, it meant Father free, Mother safe, himself honoured and special and given everything he wanted - Hermione and Anthony safe - and everything all right, the crushing cold burden of fear he'd started to feel pressing down on him heavier last night gone, vanished like a miracle.

Of course, Potter won instead.

God damn it, Draco thought. God damn it. Potter'd never even been particularly good at Potions, it felt like he was doing it just to spite him.

Added to that Professor Wobbly Bottom looked at Draco like he was something the cat had left on the stairs and would be disciplined for later, and at Potter like he wanted to lick honey off him, in a manner entirely improper within a student and teacher relationship.

Draco actually felt sick with fury and envy and disappointment.

"How did you do that?" Weasley whispered to Potter.

Potter looked at Draco, didn't look away. "Got lucky," he said.

Draco swept out of the room and tried very hard not to destroy the entire Ravenclaw dormitory in a fit of rage. He wanted to study with Hermione: she'd sit with him and touch his hand and calm him down, but she wasn't there, she hated him and she had to stay hating him, too. He couldn't have someone as smart as Hermione close to him while he was trying to...

She didn't want to be friends with him again anyway. She was too busy telling Potter how attractive he was, Ginny Weasley told him. She frowned slightly as she said it and Draco marvelled that these Gryffindor girls should waste so much of their time. Apparently now they were telling Potter things that His Chosen Arrogance, the Boy Who Had A Swollen Enough Head Already Thank You, already knew perfectly well.

It was nice that Ginny was still talking to him, though. He was sitting in the library once reading everything he could lay his hands on, the little statue he'd taken from the Room of Requirement in order to control it burning a hole in his pocket, and she walked over to him and put her hand on his forehead and said he looked tired.

He was so grateful he could have cried.

"I'm never too tired for you, redhaired vixen of my heart," he said wearily, in order to see her brother go red and furious at the table across. Potter wasn't there, no doubt his ever-expanding crowd of fans had cornered him somewhere and were in the process of having their way with him like crazed jaguars.

Oh yes, life was fair.

He was grateful for Ginny Weasley, though, and he was grateful for Anthony, and he was very grateful for Crabbe and Goyle, who were the best friends a would-be plotter could have. They couldn't guard the Room in their actual bodies, Draco'd explained to them. They were great big hulking bodies, they always looked dead suspicious. Everyone was always accusing Draco of having thugs even though Crabbe was a Child of Peace.

So he told them about little girl bodies and pinafores.

"I will not pander to your disturbed sexual fantasies!" Crabbe exclaimed, scandalised. "Homosexuality is one thing, but this! Have you read Lolita? It does not end well, Draco Malfoy!"

It took Draco three hours to persuade them that he was not trying to feed his own dark sexual fantasy life, and then four more hours to get them to accept the pinafores.

They were good friends, the best. They never even asked Draco what he was doing. He was grateful to them, inexpressibly impossibly grateful. They trusted that he knew what he was doing.

He wished he did. He kept following Borgin's directions but nothing was working, nothing seemed to be going right, and the first time he had to report back, in the village at Hogsmeade, there was Fenrir Greyback. He wished it was Lupin, God, how he wished it was Lupin.

"Looking a little under the weather, Draco?" inquired Fenrir, and touched his face. Draco stepped back with all possible speed.

"Feeling fine!" he said. "In the pink!"

"Your auntie sends her love," said Fenrir, and Draco breathed a little easier, thought of Aunt Bellatrix, who would serve him up to her Dark Lord with a cut throat but who did love him, who did love him, and felt pathetic and desperate to be relieved by such a message and such a messenger. "Little Rosmerta's under the Imperius curse, if you find her useful for anything," went on Fenrir Greyback, and while Rosmerta the barwoman stared at Draco, her face blank as a doll's, Fenrir traced a suggestive line between her breasts. "Not really my style," Fenrir drawled. "But if you like her..."

"God, no," gasped out Draco, and felt dizzy and sick with horror. "God. No."

But he looked at her and he thought of that cursed necklace in Borgin and Burkes. Simple, a curse, death, it didn't even have to pass through his hands. He wanted it to happen, of course he did, but he would prefer if it happened from a distance.

He didn't want to examine why too closely. He might be weak like Dad had always thought, but if he could just get the job done and not have to think about it anymore. If he could just do that.

He had the cursed necklace passed through Madam Rosmerta's hands. She gave it to some Gryffindor girl Draco only knew by sight, someone called Katie Bell.

She almost died.

Draco spent that night in the bathroom, being sick, crying, being the weak stupid idiot he'd tried not to be, knowing that if Anthony and Terry and Hermione knew, now, what he was and what he'd done, they could never forgive him. He'd reached the point of no return.

The only way was forward.

There was a ghost there who was very nice to him, but he couldn't look at her, because she was a murdered girl, and he'd almost. He would have been responsible.

"We just have to pretend not to hear him, Ron," he heard Hermione say on the stairs the next day.

"But he won't stop," Weasley was raving, like he thought he had problems. "He won't stop talking about it and it's not actually healthy, he's a man obsessed-"

"We just have to ignore him," Hermione repeated, so patient with her chosen dolt. "We pretend we're deaf every time he starts talking about-"

They both saw him at the same time, and Weasley gave him a filthy look. Draco gave him one back with interest, and then swept on his way. He wondered what the hell they were talking about, anyway. Potter being a freak about something, clearly, which was hardly groundbreaking news.

He didn't have time to think about Potter, anyway, he really didn't, and so he usually forced himself to stop whenever he did.

It was familiar and sort of comforting to hate Potter, but Draco preferred not to think words like grisly murder any more, and whenever he steered away from the beaten and beloved 'die, Potter, die' track he had terrible thoughts about not breaking Potter's nose, or Potter talking about Sirius Black, or the Truce That Lasted One Day, or God forbid that incident where Potter was Temporarily Deranged and Sexually Confused For Love of Cho Chang and Draco was Quite Possibly Concussed.

He tried not to think about Potter, which was hard to do when Potter was everywhere, watching for the time Draco betrayed himself, obviously, waiting for Draco to slip up so Potter could turn him in. Well, nothing new there. They'd always been enemies, and always would be.

He wished the new Potter fans were quieter, though, with Potter following him like a private eye and them following him like besotted ducklings, Draco had a constant migraine and they kept talking about mad things like how many showers Potter was taking. Draco could have

gone his whole life without those mental images, but no.

One day, with that Katie Bell girl still in St Mungo's and not even the news that the Gryffindors' Quidditch practise had been sheer mayhem able to cheer him up, Draco broke. Anthony, who had brought him the news and looked up hopefully at him, like a dog bringing slippers or something, for some returning cheer, looked very alarmed.

"Draco, are you going to hyperventilate," he said anxiously. "Should I get a paper bag, do you want my inhaler?"

"Don't put your amulet anywhere near my mouth!" Draco exclaimed hastily. "I - God, I - Where's Terry?"

What he wanted, he realized dully, curled up in a chair and thinking about nothing but cabinets, papers slipping through his fingers like his marks at school were slipping down, was some comfort. He was too weak, like Dad said. He wanted something like when he was in the infirmary and Hermione and Terry came to comfort him.

Terry'd rubbed his back. He's never collapsed in front of Anthony, wouldn't in front of Crabbe and Goyle, because they trusted him to be stronger and smarter than they were. But he did have Hermione and Terry, or he used to have them.

He could not go back to Hermione, but he could find Terry. Even with all he suspected, Terry would be kind.

"Er," Anthony said. "Terry. Terry Boot?"

"Yes," Draco said.

"Who knows?" Anthony said airily. "The prefects' bathroom, I expect, yes, Draco, that's where he is, the prefects' bathroom, into which tragically you cannot get. Not having the password. Uh. Not being a prefect. Because of the unjust system of this tyrannously cruel school, like you always said. Best to stay here. Perhaps we could write my mother together, Draco. Perhaps we can get you some iron pills."

Draco did not want Anthony's crazed mother to feed him iron or any other sort of metal, but he did want to see Terry.

"I'll go wait," he said, and left to the faint, dying-duck sounds of Anthony's protests. Anthony was a funny little man sometimes.

Draco was scared for him. He was scared for a lot of people. He wasn't scared for Terry, Terry was a pureblood, and Terry always knew the right things to say - well, mostly - and he'd liked Draco a lot, or seemed to. Draco was frantically aware as he walked down the corridors that he was in a terribly unstable frame of mind and he should go back to Anthony and not do this, but he was doing it anyway.

He went down to the prefects' bathroom and as he walked towards it, he saw Terry's back walking away from the closing door.

"Wait up," called Draco, and ran, dizzy with glad relief that it was so easy. "I've been looking for you."

He caught up and saw that there were several thin dark-haired boys in school, and one of them was indeed Terry, and another was bloody Potter. He was even wearing Muggle clothes. Either Draco was the stupidest man who had ever lived, or he was too delirious with exhaustion to think.

"So sorry," he said, and he must be in shock if he was being polite to Potter. "I thought you were Terry. I'll - go away now."

"Don't go," said Potter, and caught his wrist.

Draco realized with a sort of weird shock that Potter, for all he was thin, was pretty strong. Stronger than Draco was, because Potter spent all his time playing sports and Draco spent all his time in the library, very useful, like the library was helping him much now.

Draco felt vaguely blasphemous thinking that way, but mostly he felt panic-stricken, like Potter could read his mind and knew what had happened to Katie Bell. He tried to pull his wrist away but Potter held on tight. He's not an Occlumens, Draco thought frantically. He's not an Occlumens.

"Sorry I'm not Terry," Potter said, with his mouth making a funny shape - he was mental, that's what he was. "Only. I want to talk to you."

I won't tell you a thing! Draco shrieked like a hysterical girl in his mind. Jesus, maybe Potter would let him into the prefects' bathroom so he could weep there. Again.

Trying to think about anything but death and cabinets and failure and its consequences, his thoughts scattered and fell in unexpected and terrible places. Like light on water, unfocused and then suddenly so bright and sharp it hurt to look at, Draco realized what he'd sort of known before: that the fans were onto something, that Potter was attractive.

He was fresh from a shower, clearly: black hair damp, the new annoyingly tanned skin damp too, with that damp sort of sheen about it. There were wet little bits of hair clinging to Potter's neck and ears, his white worn T-shirt - why did Potter never have any decent clothes, Draco thought in a bid to distract himself - sticking a little to damp skin beneath, chest and shoulders. His grip on Draco's wrist was warm and strong.

This, Draco thought with the impulse to hysterics bubbling up again, must be what madness feels like.

"Right," Potter said, catching an even firmer hold of his wrist and stepping into Draco's personal space. Draco enjoyed his personal space, he was fond of it, up close and personal with it, he had not invited Potter to invade.

He recalled the history lessons from Muggle Studies. His personal space was like Poland: Potter shouldn't invade, it would mean war. Potter stepped in again, green eyes bright, intent - oh my God, Draco thought in a moment of purely selfish panic, is he going to torture information out of me?

He'd Crucio'd Aunt Bella.

Draco took a step back and into a wall, and Potter just followed him. Brilliant tactics, Draco, corner yourself, that's genius, he told himself. He should've been Sorted into Hufflepuff.

Potter was talking about doing a lot of thinking over the summer in his low, rough voice. Had Potter always had a voice like that? Maybe it was the insane voices in Draco's head talking.

"I would rather not talk," he announced to the voices in his head, or possibly Potter.

Potter's grip on his wrist became actually painful. "Yeah?" he said. "Too bad."

At that moment Draco knew it was Potter because nobody besides Potter, not even the voices in Draco's head, could be so extremely single-minded and irritating. He looked at Potter's black-fringed, serious eyes and felt a bit light-headed, the thoughts he was thinking were so reckless and insane.

Well, he thought. Potter owed him one moment of sheer insanity. And this might put him off all the snooping.

"No, really," he said, and grabbed a handful of the faded fabric of Potter's shirt, twisted. "I don't want to talk."

He used his grip on Potter's shirt and pulled him forward, kissed him hard.

Or that was more or less the intention, but then their glasses hit together and Draco touched his mouth against Potter's and then there was the little clink and frankly he felt like an idiot, albeit an idiot whose heart was going too fast and breath was coming too fast. All he'd had was a glasses-clinking awkward instant of insanity.

Potter stared at him and Draco realised he was quite possibly about to die. Everyone would definitely forgive Potter for doing it: maybe they'd hide his body in the cabinet, it would be the most ironic cover-up ever.

Then Potter, so close his nose was still touching Draco's, drew off his glasses - his glasses, leaving him defenceless and not Draco, Draco could totally sucker punch Potter right this minute - and drew Draco back against him, almost gently, mouth open and hungry against Draco's.

Draco put an arm around Potter's neck and kissed him back. He kissed him properly, angry and desperate and afraid and confused and this was Potter, he'd never known how to do anything half-way with Potter. What am I doing, he thought with terrible clarity somewhere in the recesses of his mind, as he kissed Potter and kissed him, leaned back against the stone wall with Potter's warm hands up his shirt, shirt lifting so the stone and Potter's calluses were both rough against his bare skin. He twisted one hand in Potter's damp hair and got him closer, teeth light in his lip, face curved towards Draco's exactly right and the kiss making fire curve sharply down in Draco's stomach, hit the base of his spine.

Potter broke his wet mouth away to breathe and moan against Draco's lips for a moment.

Draco had exactly one second to panic before Potter kissed his cheek, and his chin, and his jaw, and then Draco tilted his head back and Potter leaned in, his ridiculous sticking-up hair sort of rough against the underside of Draco's chin, and bit on Draco's neck. The bite was quick, good, tingling, and Potter's lips were warm and trembling against Draco's throat.

Draco, because he wasn't used to not being on the sort of terms with people he was kissing that would make gestures appropriate, drew his hand through Potter's silly hair and was surprised at the reaction he got: Potter pressed his face against Draco's wrist, as if hardly anyone had ever been affectionate with him before.

Then he bit down on Draco's neck again.

Draco made a sharp, helpless sound. Potter kissed his ear, and then said into it: "Let me-"

"What, God, I am letting you, Potter, keep up," Draco said, deeply and very briefly annoyed. He kissed Potter's mouth again.

Potter's chest rose and fell, sharply, against his. "Yeah, okay, um, yeah," he said - clearly the Chosen One wasn't Chosen after any kind of vocabulary test. "Just, let me, I need to make sure-"

He bit the side of Draco's jaw and Draco moaned and let his head fall back against the stone and Potter pushed his sleeve down his left arm and...

Pushed his sleeve down his left arm. To get a look at his left arm.

Draco shoved Potter back violently.

"What," he demanded, "what the hell is wrong with you?"

He stormed off, he didn't look back, it would take Potter a minute to put his glasses back on and Draco needed that minute for storming. When he got back to the dormitories Anthony looked at him fearfully and said: "All right, you've found out, I'm really sorry, I just didn't know how to tell you about Terry and Smith, again-"

"What," Draco bit out.

Anthony gulped. "I - need to consult my mother on this subject," he said. "Hold that thought for tomorrow's Owl post."

Draco went and lay on his bed and thought of Cabinets and Potter and how his life was in irredeemable ruins around him. Terry and Smith. Well, well, well. Maybe he'd been second choice all along: nice how things worked out.

Obviously Anthony and Terry had a word, because Terry came and sat by his bed, looked down at his hands.

"It's not that," he said in a low voice. "It's not like, with you. But I can, I can trust him not to - I'm really afraid for you, Draco. I'm really afraid that you'll do something terrible."

Draco looked at Terry's profile, familiar and dear in the low light, and thought of Dad and everything else. It made him want to hurt things, or possibly cry again. "The hell with you," he said, rolling in bed and turning his back. He thought of Katie Bell, and speaking into the darkness before him, continued: "How do you know I haven't already done something terrible?"

Terry said nothing. After a while, he left Draco alone.

*

The next day, apparently Weasley had caught Ginny and her current boy toy kissing and was having knicker fits about her very hypothetical chastity. Ginny came and sat beside Draco and fumed.

"Just because he's sexually retarded!" she said.

"Well, to be fair, face like that, it's hard to find partners," Draco murmured. "Not the poor lad's fault. Tragic, really."

"Don't you talk about my brother that way!" Ginny flared.

Weasleys and their tempers, you'd think they would be ashamed to be such a cliché, but no. Draco poked uninterestedly at his porridge.

"Draco, what's that on your neck?" Ginny asked.

Draco's hand flew to cover it. "Er, paperweight," he said. "Yes, Anthony, he gets - riled. He's a terror when he's roused, flings paperweights willy-nilly but with deadly accuracy. It is a painful subject. Let us not discuss it. Let me walk you back to your table."

Ginny stared at him for a minute, her brown eyes worried, and then she put a hand against his back. He wondered why.

"I think you should sleep more, Draco," she said, and he wanted to put his head in his arms and have her stroke his head a bit.

He wanted Hermione, whose compassion was all-enveloping and wrong-headed and sometimes involved actual violence, but enormous. He liked Ginny, pretty well, and she was kind to him because she'd noticed him, but she could be thoughtlessly unkind to anyone she hadn't noticed. He wanted the way Hermione cared about everyone, even the house elves, even when she was showing it all wrong and making everyone want to strangle her with her own bushy hair.

Next to her Ginny was like a cup of water when a man wanted a well, but he was parched anyway. His mother's weekly letter had arrived today, careful and polite and written for the censors. It began 'my dearest Draco' and asked him to re-think staying over Christmas.

He had to stay over Christmas. He had work to do, and no idea how to do it.

He took Ginny over to her own table. He was wearing Anthony's Excused From Life t-shirt

on purpose: he helped Ginny to a seat next to Potter, for which she gave him a grateful glance, and Potter looked at him and looked at him, and Draco deliberately showed him the white, unmarked skin inside his left arm.

He bent down and spoke into Potter's ear.

"You think Dumbledore would let a student in who had the Dark Mark?" he said. "Be serious! Of course it's not there, but listen up, Potter... that doesn't prove anything. And you can't prove anything. You were wasting your time - and you didn't have to bloody do that!"

He gave Potter a terrific shove in the back for being a vile whore in the cause of spying for righteousness, and stalked off before Potter could talk to him.

While Potter was winning yet another Quidditch match, this time against Slytherin, Draco was cursing and weeping and hitting a cabinet. Oh, life was grand.

*

Anthony kept coming to Draco with news he thought might please him, since he knew Draco's gossip fiend ways all too well.

Apparently Ron Weasley, a man too stupid to be permitted to live but Hermione'd probably want to kill him herself, was going out with Lavender Brown. They made octopuslike displays about the school and Draco caught one himself: he felt glad he'd forgotten to eat anything that day. He watched Hermione furtively from the library shelves, and she seemed furious but more or less all right.

Potter had asked Loony Lovegood to Slughorn's dance - he was crazy, here was the proof, Draco had known it all along. Terry and Zacharias Smith were still creeping about, and Ginny was starting to get tired of Dean Thomas because of all the qualities that made him, more or less, Not Harry Potter. Pansy Parkinson was still gloriously on the market and would attend to Anthony's wooing one fine day.

"Oh really," Draco said with enormous scepticism. "Well, I - I need to go to... study."

"You can study here," Anthony offered. "I'll be quiet, I'm writing Christmas cards, a lot of people are at the party."

"I need to get a - thing," Draco said.

He knew perfectly well a lot of people were at the party, which meant this was an ideal time to go and work on the Cabinet.

Or it was an ideal time if you did not happen to be Draco Malfoy, born under a cloud of ill omen, and Filch caught you sneaking around, utterly and cruelly disbelieved your brilliant lie about being invited to Slughorn's party, and dragged you by your ear in front of all your professors, chosen classmates and of course the Chosen One himself, Harry Potter.

Potter was standing beside Loony and Professor Wobbly Bottom, laughing at something, clearly having the time of his life.

"So I wasn't invited," Draco snapped. Filch could take him away to the dungeons for all he cared, as long as he took him away from Potter. "I was trying to gatecrash, happy?"

"Let him stay," Potter said suddenly.

God, he was now an object of charity for the Gracious Chosen One, on top of everything else, Draco thought savagely, as Professor Wobbly Bottom rushed genially to comply with every wish of his darling Potter's heart. He stood there, avoiding Potter's rude staring, and tried to use Occlumency to kill Potter with his mind.

"I'd like a word with you, Draco," said Professor Snape.

Draco was filled with extreme dismay. He'd been managing to steer clear of Professor Snape all year, since Mother had been egging him on to interfere with Draco's plans and Aunt Bella had warned him. He didn't need this, on top of everything else. God, his head was aching, he was bone weary.

"I want to talk to him first," Potter snapped. Potter's disrespect to authority figures was yet another sign that he'd been badly brought up.

"Aren't I the popular one," Draco drawled. "I don't know, I do declare, my dance card is almost filled right up, perhaps I could squeeze one of you in for the waltz-"

Potter grabbed his wrist and Draco went still. Wrist-grabbing had not gone well last time: Draco wasn't going to spill any information, Potter could bloody well give it up. He wished he'd eaten today, instead of spending lunchtime with the Cabinet, composing an Owl to his father.

He couldn't send any Owls and they were always the same anyway: I'm sorry I disappointed you, I'm trying harder now. It's still not enough: I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

"Don't," Draco said, and tried to wrench his wrist unobtrusively away.

Potter held on. "Don't do this," he said. "What. What are you doing?"

"Why, Potter, I think if I told you, it might not be a secret," Draco explained, and tried to twist his wrist away again.

He wouldn't look at Potter, so he looked at the other people, at the brilliant lights and the party food, at everyone staring curiously at the boys who were making a scene. Draco was too tired for this, too angry, too ready to snap.

"No," said Potter. "I mean, what are you doing to yourself?"

Nights up thinking about Katie Bell, about Dad, about what the Dark Lord had promised their family - death or glory, no in between, not for any of them. Nights up with the Cabinet, and nobody to talk to or lean on, nobody at all, and how it didn't seem to matter sometimes, and then it all mattered too much for anything else to matter ever again.

Maybe he might, he should eat or sleep more. He remembered catching a glimpse of himself in a mirror recently and being vaguely stunned, horror slipping through his fingers.

"You look - terrible," Potter told him, quietly.

Resentment burned, dull in the hollow pit of his stomach, at that. Of course he looked terrible, he was standing about looking terrible at some party he hadn't been invited to while everyone else had a good time and Draco was alone and he didn't know how to protect anybody or solve anything, and Potter carried on meanwhile with his charmed, charmed life.

"Sorry I'm not pretty enough for you," Draco responded sharply. "Let go, Potter."

"That's not," Potter said, and cleared his throat. It sounded painful, which was strange: Draco couldn't see what Potter might have to feel bad about. "That's not what I meant."

His grip went gentle and that made Draco look up, startled. He hadn't had much gentleness, these past few months, it felt strange, and of course it was strange coming from Potter. What was he supposed to do with that?

He looked at Potter and the world turned over and over. He felt sick and changed: incredulous and sick again. He'd spent half his life wanting to hurt Potter, as badly as he possibly could, planning detailed scenarios of the same. He'd never planned anything like this. He took it back. He didn't want it after all.

"It's just," Potter said, his voice wavering a fraction. "You're so thin."

"Leave me alone," Draco snarled, and pulled his wrist free of Potter's grasp at last. "I can't - I can't."

He stopped, as if he'd forgotten what it meant to be free to move, and then he was in motion again, away from Potter and Professor Snape and anyone else who might try to stop him doing what he couldn't do anyway, what he had to do somehow.

"My dear boy," Professor Slughorn said, eyes moving between them. "I had no idea - you must come to my next little gathering, both of you, naturally-"

"Leave me alone!" Draco repeated, shouting at both of them, shouting at the whole room.

He had to go, he thought even as he was going, running, from all of them towards the Cabinet which was his family's only hope. He shoved people away, out of his path, desperate to get away from all the laughing crowd and the shining lights and Professor Snape's stern face and Harry Potter, Harry Potter of all people, looking at Draco as if Draco was breaking his heart.

Chapter Nine

Draco came stumbling from the Christmas party to find Anthony sitting alone in the boys' dormitory. He looked pleased when Draco entered the room, and then saw Draco's face and fetched him a chair as if his inhaler amulet gave him the power to read minds. Draco collapsed into it thankfully.

"Where've you been all night?" Anthony inquired.

"Crashed Slughorn's party," Draco lied promptly.

"Was it brilliant?" Anthony asked in an excited tone. "Do Hermione and Blaise Zabini do dark sexual spells like the Hufflepuffs say?"

"I will not have you smirching Hermione's reputation," Draco said indignantly. "The worst thing you can accuse her of is having an unfortunate freckle fetish. She is more to be pitied than blamed."

"Did Harry really go to the party with Luna Lovegood?" Anthony pursued, and on Draco's nod looked awed. "Wow, I don't dare talk to her in case she brings up those Snorkacks again. Truly, he is the valiant Chosen One."

Draco would really have appreciated it if Anthony could have refrained from mentioning Potter's name. He actually felt ill when he thought of how Potter had looked at the party. More ill than usual.

He had - things to do. He couldn't think about it now.

"Draco, are you feeling all right?" Anthony asked, and felt his forehead. "D'you want an iron pill?"

"I've told you time and again, Anthony, I am not going to take that kind of risk," Draco said. "I could break all my teeth on that metal. Where is everyone?"

"Well, Terry's - you know," Anthony said awkwardly, and Draco felt too tired to even hate Zacharias Smith. "And Michael's with Cho, and I think Kevin - well, you know, the Christmas season can be lonely, Draco, let's not be too quick to judge, but I think I saw him sneaking up to the teachers' quarters with a fresh bottle of sherry."

Draco absorbed this in silence for a moment, and then said at length, "You don't need Divination to know that Entwistle is a very disturbed man."

"Well... I'm sort of glad they're all gone," Anthony said. "It gives us a chance to talk. You've just - been acting very odd lately, Draco."

Oh God, no, Draco thought desperately, not tonight of all nights, not when Potter had just - looked at him, he was doing this for everyone, for Anthony too, because Aunt Bella'd said the only way Mudbloods would be spared was if they had someone to speak up for him, but Draco couldn't, couldn't tell him now. He couldn't look at Anthony and tell him.

He could hardly hear Anthony through his panic, as if he was drowning and his ears were filling and his mouth was filling, he couldn't hear or speak.

Anthony finished detailing the particulars of Draco's strange behaviour and said, "So I concluded, after the break-up with Terry and all, you've become a self-loathing homosexual and, obviously, an anorexic."

Draco stared at him. "Are you insane?"

"Mother and I agree that all the evidence points that way," Anthony informed him. "I know, Draco, it's a common misconception that the disease is exclusive to women. Don't worry, though. You're not alone in this. The first step is to admit that you have a problem. Tell me the truth, Draco: do you hate your body?"

"No!" Draco squawked.

"You're in denial, then, that's okay too," Anthony said. "I got a pamphlet. Denial is very common. Er. I'm to help you get over your body issues and admit your own very human weakness."

"Have you shown Crabbe and Goyle this pamphlet?" Draco asked, touched by cold fear. "Don't show Crabbe and Goyle this pamphlet."

Anthony moved his chair to touch Draco's.

"Er," he said. "No. Er. Okay, Draco, you are a dear friend, and your sexuality does not make you, whatever you may think, unworthy of love."

"Anthony, I really don't hate my body," said Draco. "Really. I swear. I'm quite attached to it."

"I wish," Anthony ploughed on, "to show you that there are people who care for you and are in no way repelled by you. Er. So. You may kiss me, if you like."

Draco sat petrified by astonishment, staring at Anthony's earnest face in the darkness. Anthony looked nerved for a homosexual leap at any moment.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes," Anthony said bravely. "But! I want to say, Draco, I would not feel comfortable with any... wandering hands."

"Anthony, I thank you," Draco said as seriously as he could. "You are a true friend. But I'm all right for kissing just now, honestly."

"Oh," said Anthony, almost collapsing with relief. "Oh, well, thank God for that. My next thought was this," he went on, cheering up. "I have decided to find you a boyfriend, to help with your self-esteem issues and also contribute to your recovery with positive physical reinforcement. My first thoughts were of Justin Finch-Fletchley, who as you may know has taken up quilting, or Theodore Nott, who was seen the other day discussing a serial romance

featured in Witch Weekly, but then I struck on a better plan. You may think it's crazy, Draco, but hear me out!"

Draco waited in dread to hear about Professor Firenze's enormous capabilities of pleasing a man.

"Harry Potter!" Anthony announced triumphantly. "Cho said she definitely got that vibe from him. And he does kind of eye our table and turn up in the library a lot. I don't know, Draco, I know you have a holy hatred for him and everything, but I think you should investigate the possibility. You could, like, use him for his body."

Draco started to laugh, partly because Anthony was insane and partly because his life was surreal and it hurt and he didn't want to cry about it in bathrooms again. He laughed, and laughed, until it became a little hysterical, and then he kept laughing until he found it hard to breathe.

Anthony helplessly offered him his amulet.

*

"I still don't see why it was so funny," Anthony complained the next morning, which was the morning everyone but Draco was going home for Christmas.

Anthony had insisted, with a terrifying light in his eyes, that he wanted to see Draco eat a hearty breakfast, so they were shoving through the crowds of girls who had planted themselves under the mistletoe waiting for their last chance with Harry Potter.

"Coming through," Draco said, administering a judicious push in the back. Anthony followed in his wake, since he wasn't vicious with his elbows like Draco. "Can't the cult of the Chosen One, I don't know, commit ritual suicide or something? Out of my way, I don't care how tall he got over the summer, I want my porridge!"

"Malfoy!"

"Hide me," Draco said urgently. "Anthony, if you ever loved me at all-"

"Hi, Harry!" Anthony said brightly. "Over here! Nice to see you! How are you? So, you're still single, aren't you?"

"I hate you," Draco muttered. "I've always hated you. I just wanted you to know."

Potter shambled through the crowds of girls as if they were so much mist and he, frankly, had no idea why the mystifying mist was there or what it could possibly want.

You know, the clues had all been there for a long time. Draco probably should have known.

"I - yeah," Potter said. "Yeah, I am. Hi, Malfoy."

There was a pause.

"Hi, Anthony," Potter added.

He was hopeless, hopeless and unbelievable, Draco should have withered him with a look of scorn and passed on his way. Only he found himself staring at the floor and not able to look at him at all. Draco was enraged with himself for being such a complete pathetic idiot.

"Hi, Harry!" Anthony said again.

"Yeah, hi, Anthony," said Potter.

"Hi, Potter," Draco muttered in order to end the madness, and stared at the floor some more.

"Oh, look," Anthony said ingenuously. "Mistletoe!"

"I don't really like you that way, Anthony," Potter said gruffly. "Uh. Malfoy. Look, I'm going away - to the Weasleys', you know, because, um, it's Christmas - and I wanted to, before I went-"

"Anthony, I need to go eat! At once!" Draco said imperiously. "I feel very faint. Faint with the hunger pangs," he added out of sheer shameless desperation, and actually now he came to think about it, it was true.

"I'm sorry, Harry, we must go. Let us continue this fascinating conversation later!" said Anthony.

"Yeah, you should - eat," Potter said. Only the warning bells in Draco's head saved him: he looked up, saw Potter was reaching out, and stepped smartly away using Anthony as a human shield. Unfortunately then he was looking at Potter. "Happy Christmas," Potter said. "Don't - do anything you might regret."

"I have to go," Draco told him, and hauled Anthony off to the Ravenclaw table.

Potter was ridiculous, ridiculous, he could barely get out words, and he was going to die. And Draco had always hated him. And he should want him to die.

Once at the table, Draco had to feebly resist Anthony's attempts to feed him. Terry joined in since apparently it was okay to encourage Draco to eat, though Terry preferred boyfriends who were, who hadn't almost killed Katie Bell.

Yes, well, put that way, it was understandable.

Draco put down his spoon. His reverie was interrupted by a girl with dark hair and a prominent chin, who leaned over and grabbed the front of his robes.

"You," she said. "Do you know how to make a Polyjuice Potion?"

"Unhand me!" Draco ordered in ringing tones.

She did not seem to hear. "No matter," she informed him, "that part should be easy enough." She fixed him with a bright smile. "My name's Romilda Vane," she said. "I want to buy a

lock of your hair."

For a Potion? Draco had always felt he had an interesting and individual face, but really, wanting to wear it was going a little far.

"You must be mad," he said flatly.

Romilda Vane leaned across the table with a frightening glint in her eye. "I'll pay good money."

"I am independently wealthy, thank you," Draco sniffed. "Now run along."

God preserve him from Gryffindors.

"Have some lovely custard," Anthony coaxed.

"Anthony," Draco said, "it is breakfast time."

"Well, I thought you might fancy some custard," Anthony wheedled. "It's lovely, you know."

Terry buttered him a piece of toast.

Draco missed them both when they were gone and he had nothing but the Cabinet, hours and hours of working on it and not getting it right, and trying not to think about anything else. He had a mission: he had something to concentrate on, he didn't have to think about anything else.

The only real break was a trip to Hogsmeade, where he met Aunt Bella. At first it was a great relief to see her: she wasn't Fenrir, most importantly, and she kissed Draco on his aching brow and gave him a Christmas present.

It was a tiny guillotine.

"Portable, you know," she said. "And you can just shrink the Muggles and carry them about with you and take out the whole set when you're bored!"

"Thank you," Draco told her. "I'm very touched."

So was she, but he was too tactful to mention it. They sat together in the pub and she bought him a Butterbeer.

"How's Mum?" Draco asked.

"Oh, well enough," Aunt Bella said vaguely. "Worried about you." Her fine black eyes fell on Draco's face. "You do look a little ill," she said, and leaned over the table and kissed Draco again. "My little nephew," she said. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Draco said hopelessly.

"None of this suffering matters," Aunt Bella went on in an encouraging tone. "For soon the

Dark Lord will triumph. Then he will make us all immortal and we will crush the world beneath our feet. Our future is glorious, Draco!"

"It sounds nice," Draco answered, to be polite.

Then Aunt Bella sat with him and asked him how the plan was progressing and didn't seem terribly disappointed that it was not yet successful. She recounted the failure of several of the Dark Lord's darkly ingenious plans to Draco in what seemed like an attempt to cheer him up.

She was truly mad.

After a couple of hours, Draco said: "Which plans actually worked?"

"Well," Aunt Bella answered. "That plan of the Dark Lord's to resurrect himself in his present darkly wondrous form and kill Harry Potter was sheer brilliance."

"But," Draco pointed out. "Potter's not dead."

Aunt Bella looked shifty. "It nearly worked," she told him. "It was a moral victory."

Draco's headache got worse.

When he had to leave, he hugged her and she held him back, and that was nice, and everything was hopeless, and afterwards he trailed into the bathroom where he knew that ghost was, and he sat in it and cried, once again.

*

By the time Potter got back from Christmas Draco had grimly thought that one out, at least. After all, it was common knowledge that Terry and Zacharias Smith were secretly seeing each other, and Justin's penchant for quilting aside, nobody else really knew about anyone but Draco.

So obviously, who else was there for Potter to pursue, whatever, it was just one of those things, Draco wasn't going to think any more about it.

There wasn't anyone else, that was all it was. It didn't matter. Potter didn't even actually like him, he'd proven that often enough. Or - said it, or implied it, or something.

Draco found it particularly easy to hate Potter while he was acing Potions with such perfect ease and bezoar stones and Slughorn's heaping praises, while Draco found himself covered in cat sick at the end of one lesson. He was so furious with Potter, who'd never been any good at Potions before, who seemed bent on rubbing it in that he'd be getting all the breaks, thank you very much.

He saw Hermione looking furious in Potions, too, and wanted to sit with her and have a discussion on the importance of application in academics so badly that he almost vomited all over the cat vomit on his robes.

He shoved past Potter that day with the best cold sneer and disdainful glare over his glasses

he'd ever managed to muster. He was doing fine.

Only ignoring Potter only seemed to make him worse: he kept staring, he was always in the library hovering near Draco's favourite shelves, Draco was sure people weren't meant to be stalked by celebrities and he had enough to worry about without trying to work out whether Potter wanted to send him to Azkaban or take him to Hogsmeade.

His father had been in Azkaban for over six months, and the cabinet wasn't working. Draco had been blind with desperation enough to send out poison, as he'd sent out the cursed necklace, and that had failed too.

Then word came back that Ron Weasley had been poisoned by some mead, and almost died.

It was Katie Bell all over again, and Draco actually waylaid Weasley's idiot girlfriend to get the story, and it had been so close, and if Potter hadn't been near a bezoar stone - to think he'd almost hated Potter for knowing about bezoar stones.

Ron Weasley. Draco'd never liked him. But he was Ginny's brother, and Hermione loved him, and if Potter knew what Draco had done, now, he'd hate him, really hate him, and Draco would deserve it.

Only Lord Voldemort had said that he might write the entire Malfoy clan off as a dead loss.

Draco had to be able to kill, he had to be able to do it. He went to the bathroom of the dead girl and he wondered who had murdered her, and if they had ever been as sorry as he was, as afraid, or as ashamed.

*

Then Crabbe had to have a crisis about his sexual identity.

"I want to help you, Malfoy," he said, speaking in a discreet tone because they'd already been told off by McGonagal. "I honestly do. But so far you just look sick and yesterday Goyle asked me which he thought was his nicest pinafore - we have pinafores in our wardrobes, Nott is starting to ask all sorts of personal questions - How long is this going to last?"

"I don't know how much longer, all right? It's taking longer than I thought it would!" Draco exclaimed. God, it would never be done, and he couldn't let Crabbe be any more complicit than he already was, and he snapped before Crabbe could ask, "Look, it's none of your business what I'm doing, Crabbe, you and Goyle just do as you're told and keep a lookout!"

"I tell my friends what I'm up to, if I want them to keep a lookout for me," Potter said quietly into Draco's ear.

Draco's heart almost exploded in his chest from guilt and fear - how long had Potter been there, why was he always there? - but before he could do anything they were all called to order by the Apparition Instructor.

Potter's best efforts at following Draco around at school all day were curtailed by one thing, though. Blessed, blessed Quidditch matches.

On the day when Gryffindor played Hufflepuff, Draco went towards the castle with Crabbe and Goyle, mutinous but disguised, behind him, and he knew he'd have hours and hours to try and get it right, blissful uninterrupted hours.

Naturally he ran into Potter at once. He directed a hollow and unamused laugh at the mocking heavens.

"Where're you," Potter said, almost dropping his Firebolt. He was a wreck, he even looked dishevelled in his Quidditch robes before he played the matches. "Where're you going?"

God, Quidditch. Draco had played Quidditch when he was a kid. He'd loved it, he remembered distantly, as if it had all happened in a different life.

He sneered. "Yeah, I'm really going to tell you, because it's your business, Potter. You'd better hurry up, they'll be waiting for the Chosen Captain - the Boy Who Scored - whatever they call you these days-"

Goyle laughed, and then all laughter in this world was cut short.

Potter scowled darkly. "What're you doing going up to the castle all alone with a pair of girlfriends?"

Goyle squawked with outrage. "Malfoy!" he said. "He just, he just cast aspersions on our maiden virtue! Beat him up!"

"Uh," said Potter. "Sorry, I didn't-"

"You cad!" exclaimed Goyle.

Crabbe might be onto something, with how Goyle was being affected by this.

"Actually, we're, going up for tea and a chat," Draco informed Potter, improvising madly. "You know how I'm, er, of a certain persuasion, and these are my... hags. Yes, hags, and what we do is, we go to tea and we talk about - boys. It's um. Liberating for me. Excuse me, I need to be liberated, you need to go greet your adoring audience, we both have lives to lead-"

Potter looked at Draco searchingly, and then straightened his shoulders. "Right," he said. "Okay. Fine. I'll come too."

"You can't come too," Draco reminded him. "There's a match on. That's why you're wearing the special clothing and carrying the broom. As I understand, it flies in the air, and the fans all scream, and you catch this pretty ball with wings on it-"

"I'm getting bored with Quidditch," defiantly uttered Potter, Captain of the Gryffindor team and holder of a record (as Draco knew purely by chance, purely by chance) on how many times he'd taken out Quidditch Through the Ages. "I'll come and talk about. Um."

"Are you - liberated too, then?" Crabbe piped up. "Oh my God! Wait'll I tell Pansy!"

Potter looked briefly diverted. "Who're you?"

"Ah," Crabbe said. "Ah. Ah. My name is - Vincentina."

"That's a nice name," Potter said abstractedly.

"You may call me Elspeth Moonfeather," announced Goyle. "For! That is what my name is."

"Okay," Potter said. They were all lucky Potter even had trouble with the teachers' names, Draco reflected with dull despair. He felt much the same emotion when Potter went deep red under his tan and attempted to answer Crabbe's question. "And. Uh. Yes. Maybe. I've - I think so, I've had - thoughts."

"How dare you talk in that unbridled way in front of unspoiled young girls," hissed Draco, who could feel himself becoming a bit unhinged.

Potter's neck was all red and he was walking away from Quidditch, his basic *raison d'etre*, and the world had gone mad and Draco with it.

"Or perhaps," he said, in maddened defeat, "Now I come to think of it, perhaps school spirit moves me to attend the game. Yes. Yes, come, Vincentina, come... Elspeth, to the stands! Potter, I wish you-" He stopped and brought himself down to sanity. "I hope you get knocked off your broom," he snapped, and stormed away leaving Potter behind him.

Then Potter did get knocked off his broom.

Anthony was just saying, "Where do you lovely ladies come from?" and Crabbe replied firmly: "We are exchange students," and Goyle added brightly, "We are from the New World! We wish to learn all about the fine wizarding traditions of England!"

And Potter was just flying, looking a little annoyed about the substitute Keeper - because Weasley couldn't play, because Draco had almost killed him - and then the bloody idiot incompetent (clearly, a born Gryffindor) Keeper McLaggen hit him in the head with a Bludger.

It made a sickening sound. Potter dropped like a stone.

Draco was on his feet. "Oh my God!" he said. "Is he all right? Can anyone see?"

Terry looked at him oddly. "Why do you care?"

"I don't," Draco said automatically, still on his feet. God, stupid Potter with his stupid stalking and his stupid inability to talk and his stupid crazy stubbornness and they'd had a truce, once, for exactly one day in fifth year, and couldn't he keep his stupid fat head out of danger for one minute?

Terry kept looking at him, with the shrewd look Draco knew so well and which Terry had seemed afraid to turn on Draco this year. "So it's," he began, and sounded uncertain. "Is it - like that?"

"No!" Draco answered violently. "I mean, I don't know what you're talking about," he added belatedly, and then in a cold voice: "Not that it's any of your business if it was. You made it not your business. Remember?"

That got Terry to look away. Draco was glad, even if he felt bad making Terry upset: it wasn't that Draco blamed him. Terry had it right, Terry had made the sensible decision, Terry'd got away from the boy who was going to do something terrible.

Draco couldn't have made the sensible decision, in his place, but obviously Terry had morals and things, Terry would've been horrified and sickened if he knew half of what Draco had already done.

Anthony turned to them and said: "It's just a concussion, they're taking Potter to the hospital wing!"

Draco felt absurdly relieved, considering that it didn't matter at all. Draco still had to kill someone. Potter was still going to die.

*

"I think I'm going crazy," Draco said a week later. "I keep hallucinating house elves. I see them out of the corner of my eye, and then... and then they're not there."

"Hmm," Anthony answered, which was not the reassurance Draco had hoped for. "You know, that Elspeth would be very attractive if she was a little older," he went on dreamily. "If only I could find her again. I like a lady with mystery. I like the chase!"

"Trust me," Draco told him. "She's all wrong for you."

They were walking back from last class to the Ravenclaw tower, and Draco bit his lip as he tried to explain why he was worried.

"It's not that I'm surprised I'm having hallucinations," he said. "I've been under a lot of stress lately, and I've always been-"

"A screaming spaz of a man," Anthony supplied.

"A little high-strung," Draco corrected coldly. "It's just I don't know what I may hallucinate next. I mean, house elves, that's weird, I wouldn't mind a nice hallucination-"

"Like dancing girls or dancing boys," Anthony suggested.

"Exactly!" said Draco. "But not, um, dancing house elves." They paused to consider this picture for a moment. "I'm very upset," Draco said at length. "If I see dancing house elves, I shall." He stopped. "I shall have the vapours."

"You're so manly, Draco."

"Oh, what about you?" Draco shot back amiably. "Willing to compromise your sexual preferences out of friendship, that's Hufflepuffian, that is, you're as manly as Justin Finch-

Fletcher-

"Take that back!" Anthony said, hitting him with his schoolbag. Draco winced a little: Ravenclaw schoolbags were no joke. "Well, we all know you wouldn't make a Gryffindor," Anthony proceeded.

"God forbid!"

"I mean, you probably wouldn't be hallucinating house elves if you were getting it daily and nightly and ever so rightly," Anthony said. He talked like this sometimes because of the pernicious influence of Muggle television shows, Draco just knew it. "I told you that you should make a pass at Harry." He sighed elaborately. "I put it all down to your poor self-esteem."

Draco hit him with his own bag, which besides books had screws and bolts and things in it for the Cabinet, and was made happy by Anthony's yelp of pain.

"For the last time, Goldstein, I do not hate my body!"

"You have been losing your looks, such as they were," Anthony went on blithely, as Draco belaboured him with blows. "I mean, maybe you're right, people who look like they've got the consumption couldn't bag the Chosen One-

Draco hit him over the head. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, I could too. I could have Potter anytime I wanted-

"Uh," Anthony said, stopping dead. Draco's bag caught him on the ear. "Ow," he added. "What, do you have, like, tools in there, Draco?" he asked, still staring ahead.

Draco had not needed Potter's presence at this point in his life. He was sorry for complaining about the house elf hallucinations, sorry, sorry. He wanted them back. He would make that trade.

"Hi," said Potter, who looked flushed from a sprint, Draco thought mordantly, from whatever his last class had been (all right, Defence against the Dark Arts, but shut up, brain!) to someplace conveniently near Ravenclaw. "I just happened to be - passing by," Potter added, as if he was fooling anyone. "Around."

Draco was practically being waylaid; if you thought about it logically, Potter was no better than a highwayman.

"Oh is that the time?" Anthony asked, looking at a blank and clockless wall. "I must away, I have an appointment with - Pansy Parkinson! Yes, we have a rendez-vous."

"You wish!" Draco yelled after his treacherous retreating back.

God, he had stuff for the Cabinet in his bag, and nobody but Potter was here, Potter could grab it and search through it, God. Not to mention what he'd said - this karma of always being humiliated in front of Potter, Draco thought wildly. It could let up while he was trying not to die of stress.

"Right," he said, fixing his gaze on a point beyond Potter's ear. "I, er, I was just joking. Well! You know me, always - full of japes..." He found his eyes moving and firmly repositioned them: past Potter, don't look at him. "A merry jokester!" he added. "Ahahaha. I have to go."

"No! Can't you just," Potter stopped, possibly because his voice had cracked. Draco sneaked a look at him: normally, Potter had no problem being loud, whatever other difficulties advanced conversation had for him. Potter met his eyes and said more quietly, "It's really humiliating, running after you everywhere."

Draco's mouth was dry: he shifted his bag on his shoulders. "Then," he said. "Then - stop."

"I have to," Potter said. "I can't help it." He moved forward an inch: Draco saw his hands were in fists. "I'm not stupid, Malfoy," he told him tightly. "I know you're up to something. I know you were angry and - and upset when your dad was put away, I was so - I was so angry after Sirius died, but you have to -"

"How long had you known the man?" Draco yelled at him, furious suddenly because - because how dare Potter, comparing himself when there was no comparison and - and sending out confusing signals, damn it! "Wasn't he a prisoner practically your whole life? It's not the same!"

"I'm trying here!" Potter shouted back. "It's not like you even got on well with your dad, Hermione told us -"

Draco remembered, of course, always and now: how Dad had never looked at him the same since he'd been Sorted wrong, how Draco had been nearly resigned to a life with Dad mostly cut out, but he was still Dad and he was still in prison. He had nobody else to help him.

"I loved him!" he screamed, and then wanted to bite out his tongue. "I mean, I love him," he corrected himself, the word scraping in his throat. "I always did. I do."

"I know that," Potter ground out. "But you're not like him. And you don't have to - I want to find out what you're doing," he said rapidly. "And I want to, I want to stop you doing anything stupid, I want you to understand that you can't do this, and I want." He stopped and swallowed. "I want."

Draco looked at him, green eyes in the shadows and face set. He was blushing again and he did look humiliated, Draco thought distantly, how amazing and impossible, but he also looked even more determined than usual.

"You can, you know," Potter said, voice shadowed as his eyes. "Have me. Anytime you want."

Draco couldn't help himself. He stepped forward before he even had time to think about it, stepped towards Potter and smacked his stupid head.

"I think you must actually be the stupidest person alive," he exclaimed. "I - God, do you, what's the matter with you, do you know what I could do with - I could - you know I'm doing something, you know I'm mixed up with, with Voldemort and you say something like that."

You could really die, Potter!" He'd almost killed two people already, he thought, trembling and thinking about death, God, he didn't want to die. "Do you," he said. "Do you want to die?"

"No," Potter answered, smiling at him faintly - he was mad past house elf hallucinations, past Draco's wildest lunatic dreams. "So, um, thanks for warning me."

This called for drastic measures.

Draco advanced. "So," he said. "I can have you anytime I want, can I? That's - interesting." Potter looked at his mouth: clearly a cunning ploy on his part, Draco refused to be distracted! "I have this big, dark plan," Draco went on. "It's - large and full of darkness. I could be here to kill you for Voldemort. Who, P.S., in case you'd forgotten, killed your parents. I could very well have had something to do with the poisoning of your friend-

"Did you?" Potter demanded. "Who were you trying to get to-"

"I'm talking now, Potter! So I can carry on all of this evil plotting, and you know, if I should happen to get bored, need a little restful amusement, I can have you anytime I want! Is that it? Or is it, why yes certainly, anytime you want, as long as you betray your father and your whole family and never have them speak to you again presuming they survive - which they wouldn't - and eventually, probably after you run off with some Beauxbatons boy, I get hunted down and killed by the Dark Lord! That kind of anytime you want? Forgive me, Potter, if I am something less than tempted!"

It struck Draco that he was awfully close to Potter for someone who was something less than tempted, so he shoved Potter back and said viciously, "You're so full of shit," and then ran.

He got to his house and slammed the door shut after him, leaned against it, in full possession of the fact that Potter didn't have the password and couldn't get him here.

It was all such a mess, and he was so tired. When he went up to his dormitory he saw himself in a mirror and his skin actually had a greyish tinge. Clearly, Potter was such an enormous Gryffindor that what turned him on was a freaking challenge. He was obviously out of his mind.

Draco hallucinated arguing house elves, all night long.

*

Potter found out about the Room of Requirement.

He came twice. Once Draco heard him swear and went still, and stayed still while Potter said things in a low, frantic voice like 'I need to see what Draco Malfoy is doing inside you'. Which, frankly, sounded a little obscene even though Draco was too panicked to be amused by it.

He just sat there and put down his tools, rested his cheek against the wall, and waited for Potter to go away and stop talking on the other side.

The second time, he'd just received a letter from his mother and he was reading it while he worked on the Cabinet.

It said:

'My darling Draco,

I write to tell you something that I think you should know. Your Aunt Andromeda is not dead.

She married a Mudblood and they had a child who is now grown-up and an Auror. I saw her once, on a raid of the Manor, and she called me Aunt Narcissa. At the time I was angry.

Andromeda and I were very close. I have been angry for a very long time.

Draco, nothing in the world means as much to me as you do. There are people who have split off from our traditions and survived. I think your Aunt Andromeda is happy. I would like, I think, to talk to her again and find out.

You have friends who are not all from our way of life. You have, no matter what you decide to do, a loving mother.

Your Aunt Andromeda is not dead, and she never has been dead to me.

Yours, with all my love,

Narcissa Malfoy

Draco finished reading the letter just when he heard the clash of Goyle's dropped scales and a scream. He froze for a moment, and then before Potter could start to speak Draco picked up his tools and grimly got back to work on the Cabinet.

Potter might have wanted to forget: even his mother might have wanted to forget.

So Aunt Andromeda wasn't dead. Neither was his father, and even if everyone else did, Draco would never give up on him.

Draco worked into the night, until he was aching and swaying, and then he made himself check on Goyle before he went to bed.

"Harry Potter hit on me!" Goyle declared in an anguished whisper. "I knew those robes were too form-fitting. I looked like a loose woman! They'll say I led him on."

Draco stared and said, "Get ahold of yourself, man."

*

The Cabinet, impossibly, seemed to get more impossible to fix every day. It should have been simple - a fluid combination of easy Muggle repair and some spells - Draco knew how to fix bones, he should be able to fix a cabinet!

He even spent hours sanding all the wood to make the transition smoother, but it was just a cabinet, and Draco was left sweating and limp and in despair. When Anthony and Terry tried to force dinner on him that day he snarled at them until they both looked scared.

They didn't let him try to get his Apparition license because he was too young. He felt like a not very sprightly two hundred year old.

He felt like an embittered and not very sprightly two hundred year old when he and Potter and Ernie McMillan, Draco's least favourite Hufflepuff, had to sit in class with Slughorn and watch him fawn on Potter and suggest making hilarious joke potions.

Draco wasn't aware that there was an exam called 'How To Be a Weasley Twin' featured in the NEWTs.

"And your Hiccoughing Solution," Slughorn went on, sweeping over to Draco's side of the room.

Draco glanced at the stuff: it was passable, he supposed. He'd been thinking about the Vanishing Cabinet and trying to fight off a migraine, if Slughorn wanted his attention he might try teaching actual classes. God, he missed Professor Snape in here, the Potions classroom was being desecrated.

"It's superb, Draco!" Slughorn went on, stroking Draco's sleeve in a distressing and inappropriate caress. "But I suppose our talented boy's been giving you some tips, ahahaha!"

It took a moment to sink in that Slughorn was actually implying that Draco needed Potter's help in class.

"That," Draco said between clenched teeth, "is the worst thing anyone has ever said to me."

"You're a funny lad!" Slughorn slapped him on the shoulder. Then he peered into Draco's face. "My boy, you look very peaky. I know Gryffindors, well, traditionally they have a lot of stamina, but you really mustn't let him keep you up at all hours of the night."

Across the room, Potter looked like he wanted to die of mortification. That was the only bright spot on Draco's life.

"At about the point you said 'Gryffindors traditionally have a lot of stamina'," he informed Slughorn distantly, "I vomited a little in my mouth."

Draco got out of that room about as fast as humanly possible, closely followed by Ernie McMillan, who looked panicked about being the only student in the classroom who Slughorn thought was romantically available.

Draco actually walked instead of running from class as usual, because he was tired and Potter looked like he was going to be in the room with Slughorn for a while. Given that Potter had recently hit on a twelve year old girl and now he apparently wanted Slughorn to taste his potion, Draco could feel a complex about himself coming on.

Walking was a mistake, since Potter caught up with him before he even got out of the

dungeons.

"Sorry about that," he said, still red. "But, I mean, he was right. You don't look-"

Potter stopped. Draco wearily supposed the mystery was solved now: the list of Potter's turn-ons included child molestation, morbid obesity and people who looked like they were dying of TB.

Potter reached out and sort of clumsily touched Draco's hair. Draco would have violently protested this unwarranted intimacy if it had not occurred to him that Potter was exactly copying the gesture Draco had made, that time outside the prefect's bathroom.

God, God. Potter was hopeless, he was like a robot trying to copy human behaviour, no wonder he'd been such a ruin with Cho, the Muggles hadn't hugged him or something and now he was broken. And he was definitely going to die. Draco's throat felt all closed up.

Potter continued to toy with his hair with a sort of determined and horribly awkward tenderness. He said, "You need to take better care of yourself."

Potter's eyes continued to be very green, Draco's mind rambled hysterically. If he and Voldemort stood beside each other, their combined eye colours would make it look like Christmas!

"Potter," he said with difficulty, "I've practically told you-"

"Well, that's just it. You did tell me," Potter said.

"You make no sense, no sense at all," Draco snapped. "It's not like evil is very stealthy. It's not like the Dark Lord is exactly hiding his light under a bushel. Evil people, they like to laugh and taunt and mock others. That's all I was doing. The pain of others, it amuses me, it fills my black heart with joy."

Potter stared at him as if he was insane, which was an unbearable indignity.

"You don't," Potter said. "You don't look very happy."

"Look," Draco shouted. "I'm dangerous, so can you just stay away?"

It took him only a moment to realise that saying that to a Gryffindor was more or less the equivalent of taking all his clothes off and doing an enticing dance.

"Anyway," he said quickly. "I don't fancy you."

The faint shocked sound made Draco spin: he wondered for a frantic instant why he had been stupid enough to linger in the dungeons, when he knew Professor Snape lived there.

Professor Snape advanced on them. "Potter," he said. "Deeply, deeply as I would have loved to tell your father in enormous detail all about this most recent development in your romantic life-" Professor Snape's eyes misted over wistfully for a moment - "I must ask for a word alone with Draco."

Potter retreated, stomping furiously, and left Snape to tell Draco that he'd made an Unbreakable Vow to protect him.

There was no reason for him to have done it, no reason at all, Draco wasn't a child and he didn't need protection and this meant that Snape's life hung in the balance too, along with Mother's and Dad's and Aunt Bella's and Draco's own. He was responsible for all of them, now.

"Looks like you'll have to break it, then!" he yelled, and fled back to the Cabinet.

After a while, his hands stopped trembling, and he was able to work again.

Chapter Ten

Draco meant to go back to the Cabinet after dinner, but Ginny decided to corner him and talk his ear off about her love life. It was almost soothing while he was trying not to think about death. Apparently she and her man had been having trouble for a while.

Draco wasn't surprised. She'd experienced Ravenclaw loving, it was obvious Dean Thomas could never satisfy her.

"It's just," she said. "You know, Hermione said to me, last year, that if I - you know, got over being freakishly shy around Harry and maybe dated a few other boys, he'd - he might notice me. He kind of likes people who stand out, you know."

Draco felt a little guilty and also had an extra-strong pang of missing Hermione, scheming wench that she was.

"And I don't know, I've just, I've fancied Harry for so long," Ginny said hopelessly. "I get all irritable with Dean and it's not his fault, I know that-"

"It's probably his fault a bit," Draco soothed. "Very irritating, Gryffindors."

"I don't," said Ginny. "I don't really know what to do."

"Well," Draco hesitated. "I mean, personally I think the relationship is doomed. Gryffindor men, you know, they're savages. Professor Hagrid used to be a Gryffindor, they should all be put in huts and kept away from drink and matches. But you might try giving the relationship a try as a proper relationship in its own right, and give up on using it to attract Potter."

Ginny bit her lip. "I suppose I might."

"Or you could try Ravensclaws again," Draco suggested. "Kevin Entwistle is a lonely, lonely man."

Ginny laughed and hit him. About then Dean joined them and gave Ginny an awkward kiss and Draco an awkward nod of acknowledging that he was friends with Dean's girlfriend. Draco gave him the glasses look of moderate disdain.

They all started talking about the Tutshill Tornados and why Dean was a madman, Ginny said fondly, for still minding about football when none of the players were allowed to fly. They were still talking when they reached the door of the Gryffindor common room.

"Want to come in, Draco?" Ginny asked hospitably.

Draco peeped in and saw no sign of Potter, but Ron Weasley being ferociously upbraided for sexual misconduct by his girlfriend.

"All right."

As they were getting in, Ginny thanked Dean for helping her in. Draco thought they might be

able to stagger on for a while, even if they were handicapped by Gryffindority.

It turned out that Lavender believed Ron had been having it off with Hermione in the boys' dormitory. Everyone watched Weasley splutter indignantly with interest.

"Harry was there the whole time!" Ron shouted.

"Scandalous!" Draco murmured, highly entertained.

Lavender slapped Weasley in the face. Draco loved a girl with spirit.

Unfortunately, then Lavender started weeping and Weasley started apologising and everything got rather tedious, and Draco's exhaustion made his eyelids droop. He would just close them for a minute...

He woke up to the sound of someone climbing into the portrait hole at four o'clock in the morning. He yawned and stretched and found Potter staring at him.

"I guess the luck hasn't totally worn off," Potter said quietly.

"You're raving," Draco informed him. "Did you know?"

"Not that I'm complaining," Potter said, "but what're you doing here?"

Draco scorned to tell a lie, and couldn't think of one anyway. "I was advising Ginny Weasley on her love life," he explained with dignity. "Applying to me was an obvious sign of Gryffindor intelligence, since Cho and Terry both chucked me with a thud that could've been heard in Wales."

Potter looked immediately interested. "I didn't know Boot had chucked you."

"Last year," Draco answered. He suddenly remembered making sure Potter didn't know on the train, but honestly, did gossip sail clear over the man's head? "Wait," he said severely. "You thought I was messing around behind my boyfriend's back? With-" he made a distressed gesture that could've meant 'you' or 'alligators' - "and with twelve year old girls? My God! I wish I had the energy."

"I just," Potter said. "I don't know how the - the guy thing works, I'm glad-"

"Terry's with Smith now," Draco went on, determined to show Potter exactly how much he missed while staring off into space and thinking of his celebrity or whatever. "Whatever," he added, in case Potter pitied him. "Good call. Chose the blond who wasn't losing his looks."

"Smith?" Potter demanded, sounding revolted. "Don't be thick. Smith can't possibly be compared with you."

He stopped and looked horrifically embarrassed.

Draco cursed his own vainglorious passion for compliments. "I wish," he blurted. "I wish you weren't Harry Potter."

Which would leave Potter just as some incredibly self-centred person with terrible hair and problems interacting in normal human society. Which Draco wanted because, what, in that case he'd consider - no, no. Of course not. He wasn't insane.

"What's wrong with me?" Potter asked, sounding upset.

"How long d'you have?" Draco inquired. "Because I could compile a list."

"You never let up for one minute, do you?" Potter demanded.

Draco looked at him and realised he was angry. Draco had blithely walked right into one of Harry Potter's enormous legendary strops.

Draco should've been Sorted into Hufflepuff. It was becoming very clear.

"I don't understand you at all," Potter raged. "And I'm trying to, I really am, but it's hard-"

"It's not my fault you were born without empathy!"

"And tonight I was talking to Dumbledore and I was thinking about killing Voldemort-"

"Killing the Dark Lord?" Draco demanded. "The powerful immortal Dark Lord who's killing people all over the countryside? That Dark Lord? You're sixteen years old! You're not even old enough to Apparate! Don't be insane, you'll only get yourself killed-"

"Like you care!" Potter shouted. "Anyway, I have to do it, Voldemort will keep hunting me, but it makes a difference that I'll face him - that I'll choose it-"

"No it doesn't," Draco yelled. "It doesn't make any difference! Because either way you'll be dead, and whether you chose it or not won't matter! And I don't-"

He didn't want anyone to die. But that was just as unrealistic as Potter's dreams.

"I'll kill him," Potter said. "I want to. And I'll-" he stopped, and swallowed. "I'll kill anyone who stands with him. I have to. Do you have any idea how worried I am that you'll do something stupid and you won't have - I've been trying to understand and maybe I would understand, and I - but it couldn't make any difference! Not if you do something unforgivable. It can't."

"Oh, what," Draco demanded, trembling. "You can do all this for the memory of your parents and I can't do anything for mine? What's there to understand? You want revenge, and I want revenge, and I want them to be safe-"

"He's killing little kids all over the country!" Potter shouted. "It's not just about revenge! He has to be stopped! And your choices, they're all bad, it's all bad and it's hard but - there's a right choice and a wrong choice. I don't know how you can't see that."

"You've never been able to see anyone's point of view but your own!" Draco snapped, and slammed out of the stupid portrait door.

He didn't want to stay there arguing with Potter. He didn't want to think about Voldemort killing little kids. Draco supposed he was, and that he wouldn't hesitate to kill Mother, or Draco, or anyone. Did Potter think that was some sort of incentive to stand up to Voldemort?

Draco had to fix the Vanishing Cabinet or they were all doomed.

As for Potter, he was doomed no matter what.

*

He couldn't get Potter's stupid words out of his own stupid head. It was more proof that he was going insane. The house elf hallucinations had only been the beginning.

Do you have any idea how worried I am that you'll do something stupid?

Draco thought of that about when he was using a saw, and almost cut off his own hand. Then he swore and threw it at the wall.

God, God, God.

He was happy for a moment when Katie Bell came back to school, completely healthy, but on the whole May was hell.

And then he got a letter from Aunt Bella, saying that the Dark Lord was growing impatient, and he knew what that meant. She added that she wanted to see him next Hogsmeade weekend.

Draco felt a pang of sheer, physical terror.

Aunt Bella would do anything to him that Voldemort told her to do. And the Cabinet wasn't working, wasn't even close to working, he didn't know how to make it work, and he was tired all the time.

He sat through classes that day in a daze, finding his hands shaking when he turned over books. Terry and Anthony united to form a protective front between him and the world, and he wanted to speak and tell them how much he appreciated it, but he was afraid that if he opened his mouth he would be sick.

He sat through lunch and the smell of food, and the sound of everyone's cheerful unsuspecting voices, made him feel even more like being sick. He felt cold, too: he wished he was sick, and his mother was here, and he wasn't just alone and disgustingly, contemptibly frightened.

Instead of dinner, he went and he found the ghost of the murdered girl. She was kind to him, seemed lonely and terribly glad to see him, and Draco thought maybe that was what death was like, far away from any exchange of love, cold and lonely. Like being in prison: like life was for Dad.

He opened his mouth to say hello and burst into fierce, ugly tears. He couldn't stand up by

himself: had to stand braced against the sink and cry as if he was vomiting, in a helpless jerking stream, choking on them and trying to talk at once.

"I can't, I can't think of what to do," Draco gasped, and his voice came out shuddering like his whole body was, shaking like a hurt trapped animal. "I have to do it and - Mother's there in a nest of them and I'm - I'm letting everyone down, and I'm so confused all the time and I don't want to die-"

"That would be a pity," crooned Myrtle. "But if you did, you'd be welcome to share my toilet."

Draco was so desperate he was grateful. He would've said so, but he couldn't stop crying, huge hacking sobs. God, if Dad could see him now, he'd be so ashamed.

"Don't," Myrtle whispered kindly. "Don't. Tell me what's wrong - I can help you-"

"No one can help me," Draco cried out. He gripped the sink with shaking hands, couldn't let go, or he'd fall down. "I can't do it, I can't! It won't work and unless I do it soon, he says he'll kill me..."

He hiccupped, shuddered and tried to meet his own swollen eyes in the cracked mirror.

That was when he saw Potter.

Potter, standing in the doorway, Potter who had started all the humiliations of Draco's life. Draco was snivelling like a little girl and Potter was there like he was always there.

Draco wanted to kill him, or to die, or something. He wheeled around with his wand and he just wanted to Obliviate Potter or hurt him or somehow make this not have happened...

A lamp broke beside Potter, and Potter's eyes narrowed - famous Potter strops, Draco thought dimly, and that was fine, he wanted Potter to be angry and not confusing him, he wanted to be angry and not confused. Potter threw a jinx and he blocked it with a sort of savage satisfaction.

Myrtle was screaming somewhere behind the roaring in Draco's ears. He couldn't care, he just watched Potter's face wiped clean of worry and fear by fury, and dodged a Leg-Locker curse that hit the cistern. Water erupted into the room and Potter went down, and all Draco wanted to do was shut his mouth, take advantage of this moment of weakness and show him that he was sure, he'd made his choice.

He lifted his wand and cried, "Cruci-"

Potter roared: "Sectumsempra!"

There was no pain.

Just a moment of sheer, blinding shock and the terrible sick sound of skin tearing, the feeling that the world had been torn in half like a piece of paper.

Then he wavered, fell back and fell down. He didn't feel the impact when his back hit the floor, either, just saw the ceiling and then Potter's face. His wand was gone, somewhere: there was blood in his eyes, veiling his sight. He gasped, couldn't breathe, clawed feebly at his chest and found torn skin, his fingers touching something slippery.

God, he was so scared, and he couldn't stop shaking and shaking, every jerk a violent move away from the pain and panic that came roaring in. He wasn't going to get a chance to try and save Mum, he wouldn't ever be able to save anyone, he was going to die here on a bathroom floor.

"No," Potter was saying. "No, I didn't - oh God, Malfoy! Help! Help!"

The ghost was screaming, Potter's desperate face was receding, and then Professor Snape was there, his wand out, and Draco felt the pain flare out, much worse, a moment of screaming agony as skin knitted and the blood was squeezed to an ooze. He felt Professor Snape's hands, oddly gentle, wiping his face.

He whispered the charm three times, and then put his arm around Draco and got him to his feet. The whole world still seemed distant and Draco clung to him, unashamed. Professor Snape put a strong arm around him and said something about the hospital wing and how it might be possible to avoid scarring.

Scarring. Draco wanted to have hysterics but he was terrified that his chest would split open again if he moved incautiously, that the miracle of being saved would be undone.

"And you, Potter," Snape snarled. "You wait here for me."

Potter scrambled to his feet. "Forget it!" he said. "D'you think I'm leaving him? God, Malfoy, tell me you're all right. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to, I had no idea what the spell would do-"

"You knew that it said 'For enemies!' on it!" Snape bellowed.

Potter halted in his fumbling efforts to reach for Draco while catching himself, looking afraid to touch him. "How did you know that?"

"It was I who invented that spell!" Snape roared. "I, the Half-Blood Prince! And you'd dare to root through my book and take my spells for yourself, would you, use them against children, like your filthy father before you-"

"You're the Half-Blood Prince?" Potter asked, and then sharply: "Sir - Malfoy!"

Draco didn't know what they were talking about, possibly Snape's secret drag name or something. The world made no sense, it was fragmenting hopelessly around him and he'd wanted to hang on, save some last shred of dignity by not fainting in front of Potter, but here it was and he could feel his knees sagging, hear Potter and Professor Snape shouting, and then the world went black and quiet.

He woke up in the infirmary. He woke gasping, sure there was something terribly wrong, and found that his chest hurt, and Potter was asleep in the chair beside him, holding his hand.

Draco held on and tried to measure his breaths by Potter's, tried not to scream or panic or ask for his mother.

The pressure of his hand made Potter stir, blink and twitch awake. "God, Malfoy," he said. "You're awake."

"I'm awake and I'm being manhandled, apparently," Draco snapped, pulling his hand away. "Which part of you almost eviscerating me to death made you think we were going steady?"

Potter went white. "Malfoy," he said. "I'm so sorry. I - God, I thought I'd killed you."

Draco thought about staring up at the bathroom ceiling and knowing that it was all over. He'd been so scared, so scared. He never wanted to make anyone else that scared.

"Yeah," he said, a little shakily. "Me too."

Potter's clothes were still wet and bloody, Draco saw with a horrible lurch. He looked as scared and as weary of it as Draco felt. He moved and Draco wondered warily if he was going to try for Draco's hand again, but Potter only leaned forward and rested his head in his arms on Draco's bed, near Draco's chest. Draco stared at the top of Potter's messy black head and his folded brown forearms.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Potter said, in a rough, muffled voice. "I don't know what I'd have done."

Sent expensive flowers to the funeral from Azkaban was Draco's thought, but Dumbledore would probably have gotten the Chosen One off. Said something like 'Harry's so manly, he couldn't be having with sissy boy crying. It was the only thing to do.'

Then it occurred to Draco that he'd never get the chance to say sorry to Katie Bell or Weasley, though he was, he was.

He reached out and touched Potter's arm. "It's all right," he said. "I mean. I know you didn't mean it."

Potter looked up, a fearful sort of glance: seeing Potter scared was a very novel experience and Draco didn't like it as much as he might've expected. Though that could have been the recent chest wounds talking.

He put his hand over Draco's, still looking up. "Malfoy," he said urgently.

Then Hermione broke into the room. She did not pause for a glance before she hurled herself at the bed, and Potter had to move back sharply to avoid what could have been a disastrous collision.

"Oh, Draco!" she exclaimed, showing alarming signs of wanting to throw herself upon his manly breast. "Oh, Draco, darling, you could have been killed!"

"Never mind, no harm done," Draco said in a desperate attempt to ward off the inevitable.

The inevitable happened. Hermione burst into explosive tears. He'd missed the way she cried, actually, like an exploding tap spraying water in every direction.

"Draco," she sobbed out. "I'm sorry for saying bad stuff about your dad, I really am, I'm sorry, I m-might never have got the chance to tell you!"

Draco looked at his bedclothes. "I'm sorry for calling you a you-know-what," he mumbled.

"I'm sorry for slapping you in the face," Hermione proceeded tearfully.

"I'm sorry for stealing your OWLs notes to study in bed one night last year," Draco went on, getting into the spirit of things. "And for telling you Weasley used them to line his owl's nest. That was a naughty fib."

"Oh, Draco!" she said, and collapsed very carefully on his chest, kissing him and bedewing his face with tears.

It was all deeply humiliating and awful and Draco patted her back thankfully, put his face against her shoulder.

"Oooh," Hermione said, disengaging. "I'll go fetch Terry and Anthony and Vincent and Gregory, they're in the staff room trying to get the whole story from Professor Snape. And - d'you want me to tell that Pansy Parkinson one? She was asking after you, apparently." Hermione's mouth formed a disapproving line. She did not like the fluffy pink quills Pansy used in the library.

Draco brightened. "Yes, do. I like her," he added defiantly. "She's a minx."

Hermione kissed his forehead again, said in a stern voice "Don't run off" as if Draco was just dying to spring from his bed once her back was turned and embark on madcap adventures, and left.

Draco lay back on the pillows and felt painfully glad.

"I've never liked Pansy Parkinson," Potter said darkly.

"What d'you know about her?" Draco inquired.

Potter scowled. "Stuff. She's in Slytherin. She's - she's obviously all hands. No good, no good at all." He began to fluff Draco's pillow in an inexperienced but proprietary manner.

Draco smirked. "I see." He lifted himself slightly so Potter could carry on - Draco liked being ministered to, that was all, he wasn't particularly fussed over who was ministering. Then he looked at his chest.

"Oh my God," he said in a high voice. "I'm scarred."

Potter's hands stilled. "I know," he answered with difficulty. "The dittany - didn't work. I'm sorry."

"Fetch me a mirror," Draco commanded. "Oh my God! Mother will have a fit. Is my face scarred?"

"The-" Potter hesitated, looking wretched, and gestured. "The underside of your chin. It is."

"I like my chin!"

"I'm sorry," Potter said hopelessly.

"I wasn't saying it to make you sorry, I told you it was all right, I did attempt an Unforgivable on you, I was saying it because I feel somewhat hysterical! I'm ruined! Ruined!"

"You're not," Potter said, still sounding upset for some reason. Draco didn't see what he had to be upset about.

"I am, too," he told him. "It's not like your scars. When people ask you how you got yours, you can say 'battling evil.' I'll have to say 'in a men's bathroom.' Won't have the same cachet. Besides, scars, they need a certain skin tone, I don't tan, I go a peculiar mauve shade in the sun, it just won't work-"

Potter made an odd sound, which turned somehow into laughter. Draco stopped and realised that Potter was clearly more than somewhat hysterical.

He laughed for a few terrible minutes, then gave a sort of groan and buried his face in his hands. "You're so weird," he said.

"I beg your pardon," Draco returned, much affronted.

"You're so weird," Potter repeated. "I don't, I don't understand you at all. I don't even know why I like you so much but God, God, I do."

Thankfully Draco was saved from having to reply to that by the advent of his friends en masse. His relief was only slightly dimmed by Anthony exclaiming, "Oh my God, Draco, are you cutting?"

*

Aside from almost bleeding to death, the incident in the bathroom sort of improved matters. He had Hermione back, and no matter how afraid he was of her shrewdness it was still so nice to have her feeling his forehead and psychotically assembling his notes.

Terry, too, was worried enough to forget all Draco's possible iniquities and he spent a lot of time making Draco hot possets. Draco liked that.

Potter's stalker tendencies, however, were exacerbated by knowing exactly where to find Draco.

"Well," he said when Draco brought this up, "I do always know where to find you. I have this map that shows me."

Draco gave him an extremely unnerved look. "Does it have pop-up pictures?" he asked suspiciously.

"That'd be a real help," Potter said thoughtfully.

Draco's voice rose dramatically. "In developing your obvious and unsettling voyeuristic inclinations, I imagine so!"

Potter just seemed entirely unaware of when he was being really disturbing. He also did not seem worried about invading the privacy of someone who had never evinced any particular fondness for his company. Every time Draco looked there was Potter, untidy head propped against something, watching him with the intentness of a slightly savage stray who wanted somewhat desperately to follow you home.

He even, somewhat unexpectedly, had the beginnings of a sense of humour. It was very disquieting.

It was easy enough, in the hospital bed, to forget that everything else in the world existed, to feel safe. It wasn't true, though.

When he was out of the infirmary, he went back to the Room of Requirement.

Potter came after him and instead of shouting and kicking the wall as usual, he said quite quietly, as if he was leaning his head against the wall and had shut his eyes, as if he was tired: "Malfoy. Whatever it is, don't do it. Please."

Draco thought of his mother, but he sat down and tried to write Dad a letter instead. He ended up just saying the same thing as he always did when he wrote those letters he couldn't send: I love you. I'm worried about you. I'm scared.

Please tell me what to do.

*

Potter couldn't play Quidditch but obviously he'd transferred his luck to Ginny Weasley via some sort of osmosis, because she won the game by three hundred points and Gryffindor won the House Cup.

"Gryffindor triumphs against all the odds? Well! I for one am shocked, shocked," Draco remarked.

Ginny seemed to feel that the appropriate way to celebrate was to spend her time constantly snogging Dean Thomas. Draco objected to that sort of thing on the breakfast table, but it was pretty funny seeing Ron Weasley stagger about declaring he had been struck blind.

Apparently what she got up to in the Great Hall was nothing compared to what she did down by the lake.

It was nice that she was happy, he supposed.

He came in one day tired and aching from working on the Cabinet, and found Cho leaning against the mantelpiece and looking rather pleased with herself.

"Hi, Draco," she said, and blushed.

"Something up?" Draco duly inquired.

"Well," Cho said. "Well, you know how possessive Michael can be, and I think he was a bit worried about him being still in school while I was out, so he - well, we decided to make it official."

She showed him her ring. Draco thought it was sad they'd already played Gryffindor. Ginny might well have mistaken the enormous glitter for the Snitch. Corner was so tacky.

"It's very," he said, and searched for one of Anthony's funny little words. "Bling."

Cho dimpled. She was still cute, Draco thought, far too good for Michael. He hoped the babies would take after her.

"I want to keep my own name, though," Cho carried on happily.

"So," Draco said, and paused in horrified fascination. "So you'll be Cho Chang-Corner, then."

"Yes!" Cho said.

"Oh," Draco said. He looked at her sparkling brown eyes, got up and put his arm around her. "Congratulations," he told her, and kissed her.

For old times' sake, for choosing him once, for the priceless look on Corner's face when he walked in. Whatever. He let her go and she smiled at him, and he said, "I hope you'll be happy."

They all seemed happy, seemed to have plans: they wanted all sorts of things, and the mist was endless even in summer, and sometimes Draco's chest hurt and he was not sure if it was in phantom pain or panic. All he wanted to do was escape.

Then he figured out the Vanishing Cabinet.

He was staring it as he had for the entire year, and then somehow, as a nonsense pattern will coalesce into a familiar, recognisable shape, he saw how to do it. He just needed to align it a little differently - it was so simple...

It was better than coming top in class, better than his first kiss. It was escape, him safe, Mother safe, Dad out, everything solved.

The constant weight off his chest lifted: he could have eaten now, or laughed, or slept. He leaped to his feet and went whooping around the room.

Then he got back to work, his hands shaking with the dizzy relief and with his haste, with nothing else. He worked with his mind a blissful blank until it was fixed, done, and then he

used the enchanted coins to tell Rosmerta. He knew that on the other side of the cabinet, in Borgin and Burke's, the Death Eaters were beginning to assemble an invading force.

He kept calm, kept talking into the coin, kept planning. Dumbledore would be back soon, and he had to be lured in. The Dark Mark, then. He cast it and he came back to the room, to pace around inside, to wait.

He'd done it. Nobody had thought he could but he'd done it, and Dad would be so proud, and soon...

They'd be in the school.

The first hint of unease was like a chill, a little quiver he felt he could ignore, a tiny whisper in his mind he wasn't listening to.

Voldemort had said that Draco should kill Dumbledore, but maybe - maybe he wouldn't have to, and even if he did, Draco hated him. They'd have a better school without him. If it was only Dumbledore, maybe...

Potter and Ginny and Hermione could get themselves killed tonight. Anthony and Terry could get themselves killed. Anyone could get killed, Crabbe or Goyle or anyone, if they brought Fenrir.

Only surely they wouldn't. Not to a school.

There was no time for doubt! He and Dad and Mum would all be killed, definitely, he'd been working on this all year, he couldn't let them all down. He wasn't a child and he wasn't a coward.

Draco remembered some of the summer's research: an item from the Room of Requirement gives you control of the inside of the room.

Draco looked around frantically and seized up a book. He dashed out of the Room and slammed the door behind him, leaned against it for a moment.

He just needed a moment to think.

He was going to do it, of course he was, for Dad, for them all, but perhaps he could warn Anthony at least, Anthony would listen, he could tell him to run. And if he told Crabbe and Goyle to barricade the Slytherins inside, oh, he was going crazy, Professor Snape was a Death Eater and he'd never let anything happen to any of them.

There was a sound from inside the Room. The Death Eaters were coming.

Draco leaned against the wall and put his face in his hands.

There was a voice from inside, saying: "Draco!"

It was Aunt Bella. Draco should let her out. Draco had to open the door, had to do it, for his whole family.

Andromeda is not dead.

What would his mother have wanted him to do, what did it matter. She'd said she would love him no matter what, and she was in danger. Dad was in danger: Dad was counting on him.

"Draco?" called Aunt Bella.

Malfoy, don't do it. Please.

Shut up, Potter, shut up!

Draco raked his fingers through his hair, pulled at it. He had sworn to do this, he had to, he had no other options. Voldemort would kill his whole family.

He'd succeeded. He'd shown them all.

Aunt Bella's voice was puzzled, but still glad, loving and glad. "Draco? Open the door, Draco."

Open the door, Draco.

He was blind with sweat or tears, shaking up against the wall. He did have to do it, he knew he did. Only - Potter, Terry, Hermione, Anthony, Ginny, he had to stop, he had to make a choice, he had to make a sacrifice!

A blood sacrifice. Draco thought of his own blood on the floor of the bathroom, and swallowed down rising bile. His throat stung, his eyes stung.

He threw down the book. He was going to open the door.

Then he was running, running as fast as he could, trying to outrun the possibility of changing his mind, trying to outrun all thought.

He ran up the stairs to the tower, his lungs burning, his mind racing, and burst through the door to the chill of the Astronomy Tower, the cracked flagstones and the sound of Dumbledore's voice. He was breathing as if he had run the race of his life.

"Do not remove your Cloak," Dumbledore was saying, just as Draco walked in.

As soon as he did, Potter threw down his Cloak, emerging against the night as if someone had conjured him from a wand.

Dumbledore looked faintly exasperated, but all he said was: "Good evening, Draco."

Draco was afraid his resolve would fail or his knees would go out from under him, so he said it at once.

"Get the Order of the Phoenix. I have about twenty Death Eaters trapped in the Room of Requirement. Take them - take them to Azkaban or something. That should help, shouldn't it?"

And - and it should mean you owe me something. Get my mother. Get her out fast, hide her. You owe me that."

And then he stopped, and shook.

Dumbledore looked even more ravaged than he had all this year, cold blue eyes fixed on Draco, black hand curled at his side. Draco had never liked him, and never wanted him to die.

"Well, Draco," he said. "I must confess you have surprised me."

Draco wanted to be sick. "Don't call me that," he spat. "I'm not one of yours. I never wanted to be one of yours. I don't like the way you treat Potter: I have no desire to be another of your projects. Just - get on with it. Take them away."

He wanted to crouch on the floor, put his head on his knees, wait until his mother came.

"Then why did you do it, Draco?" Dumbledore asked.

Draco swallowed again, wiped his wet face. "I don't know! They were both bloody bad choices," he said shakily. "But - but one was right."

He dared to look at Potter for the first time since he'd spoken, afraid he wouldn't get it out or he'd have a revulsion of feeling or he'd run as far and as fast as he could.

Potter's face was all lit up. Draco, unexpectedly, felt a little steadier.

"My mother," he demanded, looking back at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore said, "I'll see to it now. You have my word."

He looked at Draco again, slightly puzzled, like a master who had won a game by pure chance, and then he strode, his steps weaving a little, to the door. Potter rushed forward to help him, and Draco stood back and reflected that Dumbledore having a drinking problem would actually explain a lot.

"No, no, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I assure you this unexpected triumph has greatly heartened me. I shall find Severus myself."

Draco opened his mouth to speak and then decided Snape wasn't fool enough to blow his cover, and Draco had sacrificed enough people today.

Had sacrificed Dad. He felt ill again, ill and desperate at the thought of the enormity of what he had done.

But if he'd done the other thing. If he had.

Dumbledore no sooner shut the door behind him than Potter was there, hands under Draco's elbows. It was unclear to Draco whether Potter was trying to support him or grab him: Potter's face was close and his eyes were still lit up, his smile bright and trembling at once, weighted with the awkward tenderness he did not seem quite able to master.

"What d'you think you're doing?" Draco said with difficulty. "Gryffindors, I swear. You can't just leap at people, you can't assume things like... I could pull my wand on you."

"Go ahead," Potter said, sounding intensely happy.

Draco was not happy, not at all, he was still all over the place, but for the first time he couldn't find it in himself to resent Potter for having something he didn't: he was sort of glad.

Still, it did not become a Ravenclaw not to follow through. He took his wand out, even though it trembled in his hands. Potter watched it tremble.

"So - all right," he said, watching the wand and Draco at once, with concern. He reached out. "Can I?"

Draco lowered his wand a fraction and Potter, who always somehow had a million miles before you even decided to give him an inch, moved in. Draco looked at his intent face, cast green in the light of the Dark Mark, shadows cast on his face by his falling lashes.

"I didn't think you'd use it," Potter murmured.

"You've always been too freaking arrogant," Draco told him, hearing a hysterical note in his voice. "That's - that's one of your problems. One of many. I told you, I have a list - and, and you have to be polite to my mother!"

He didn't realise exactly what that conveyed until Potter looked at him again, almost awed. It made no sense that Potter would look at him like that, no sense, no sense at all: Draco didn't want him to stop.

"I can do that," Potter told him, his voice low and almost incredulous. "And. Can I-"

They were angling their faces together already: Draco was still shaking, his face was still wet, he was not sure if he was feeling relief or if he was in shock. He held onto Potter as if Potter could anchor him.

He said in a breath, "You can," and then he was kissing Potter, kissing him, hands still shaking, Dark Mark glittering in the cold summer air. Potter's mouth was warm, hands sure, touching Draco's face, his hair, shoulders, the curve of his hips, swift pressing touches that were almost chaste, as if he wanted to make sure that Draco was really there.

The kiss went slow but no less desperate and Draco was gasping with one hand clenched in Potter's shirt and one holding onto his hair. Potter pressed his lips against Draco's throat, soft mouth sliding with sudden gentleness over the scar.

Draco shut his eyes and relaxed into Potter's hands, stopped shaking, and did not stop holding on.

*

It could not last, clutching Potter on the top of the Astronomy Tower. He had to come down,

and see Aunt Bella led away. She went first, her head held high, as was her way: he had to watch her go, watch every step as she refused to look at him. As if he was as dead to her as her sister Andromeda.

He also had to watch Dumbledore smiling benignly at him, which filled him with a sort of dizzy rage, only made worse by the fact he was a little gratified by the man's attention. Potter had to go and bend solicitously over him, he was all to pieces, he must have been putting back Firewhiskey by the tumbler. At his age!

Snape, though, put down whatever hangover cure he was working on, and turned and looked at Draco.

"Draco," he said. "I'm very proud."

Draco smiled bitterly. "Of course you are," he said, to show Snape he wouldn't give him away.

Then Snape took him aside and explained matters. Draco was torn between complete indignation and total awe - because, seriously, a double, no, a triple agent playing a dangerous bluff? Snape was already the coolest teacher in school and now he was a super spy?

"Are there any others?" Draco asked excitedly. Possibly there was a fraternity of spies, possibly a network!

"Only Lupin," Snape replied in a dismissive tone.

"I really think this information would have made things easier if given to me, oh, any time before tonight," Draco informed him sternly. A sudden thought occurred to him. "What about your Unbreakable Vow?"

He'd forgotten about that, he thought with a chill. If he'd remembered, he might have opened the door, and then... and then.

Snape looked at him with his opaque black eyes. At last, perhaps because he had lied to Draco enough, he said: "Look at the man, Draco."

Draco turned and looked at Dumbledore, frail, his face almost skull-like with the skin papered too lightly and drawn too tightly over it, that black ruined hand trembling at his side.

"There's been poison working in his system all year," Snape continued in a low tone. "Now he's taken more. We're doing all we can, but it's - it's holding off the inevitable. He's unlikely to last another six months, and when the time comes - when it comes, I have promised him that I will be the one to end it. The Vow will be kept."

Draco looked away because he did not want to see Snape's face, and looked instead at Dumbledore, only to see Potter stooping over him.

"It'll kill Potter," he said, with a shock. "He loves him."

"I must say, when I think of the situation as a whole, Potter's plight does not inspire me with fluttering solicitude," Snape said dryly. "That boy is perfectly well able to take care of himself."

Snape went on mixing potions for his true master, and Draco looked over at the old man's face until he saw Dumbledore was asleep, and Potter standing somewhat helplessly beside his bed. Then he left Snape's side and went over to Potter.

Potter hadn't stopped fighting or let go this whole year. Draco didn't think, privately, that he was all that good at taking care of himself.

"How's he doing?" Draco asked, and reached up to tuck back Potter's hair, which stuck up and tumbled heavily into his eyes, somehow at the same time.

"D'you care?" Potter returned, looking startled. He leaned his face a little into Draco's hand.

"Certainly," said Draco. "Don't you know this whole business was a cunning plan to make him award Ravenclaw the House Cup?"

Potter's mouth worked and Draco tugged at Potter's hair a little and then dropped his hand and didn't really try to hide a tired smile.

"C'mere," he added, and tugged Potter forward for a light kiss.

Snape dropped his potion.

Potter smiled. "What was that for?"

"It's my birthday in two days," Draco informed him. "As you are my new gentleman friend, I'm expecting a really brilliant present. But I realise it is short notice, and so I am prepared to offer incentives to brilliance."

"I already got you something," said Potter, smiling a bit more.

"I enjoy ponies and rare first editions," Draco let him know. He tapped Potter's hand imperiously and Potter gave him a mildly baffled look. Draco sighed heavily: poor Potter, not his fault, the way all those girls were, he probably just expected a significant other to deposit themselves at his feet. "This means you should hold my hand," Draco explained. "It's a gesture."

It pulled his mother up short for a moment. She arrived with some pink-haired Auror and Professor (Super Spy!) Lupin, clearly having been pulled from her bed. Very clearly, since she was wearing a black negligee.

She'd been taken from the Manor and the promise of honours among the Death Eaters, the return of her husband, and now she was standing in Hogwarts with nothing but her life and a skimpy nightgown.

Draco felt ashamed for the moment when she was staring at him, and then she had him in her arms, pressing her mouth to his hair. "Draco," she whispered. "Draco. Thank God. Oh, thank

God." An instant later she cast a look over at Potter and said in a much more normal tone, "Really, darling?"

"Sorry, Mother," said Draco.

That was a good moment, a calming moment.

The only moment of the night when he felt sure, certain beyond a doubt that he had done the right thing, was when they led Fenrir snarling past him.

*

There were bad moments. Mother said she was filing for divorce and Draco felt so ill and guilty and resentful that he and Potter had a screaming fight and broke up the next day. They got back together eighteen minutes later, when Draco almost tripped over Potter. Who was sitting sullenly on the steps outside Draco's dormitory.

That night Draco wrote a letter to his father, the last of a year of letters that he would never send.

He didn't know how to let go: never had. Didn't want to learn. Didn't want Potter to learn either.

Romilda Vane cornered him at his birthday party on the lawn and asked if it was true Potter had a Hippogriff tattooed on his chest.

Draco regarded her limpidly. "Oh yes," he replied. "And he can flex his muscles and make it do a little dance."

Anthony and Terry had to forcibly prevent Draco from staging a dramatic re-enactment of a Hippogriff dancing. Draco might've been a little tipsy: well, he was legally an adult that day, after all. It was cause for celebration.

It was probably not cause for celebration that Pansy now had many incriminating pictures of him attempting a song using a spoon as a magical microphone, or that he tried to spin Hermione on the lawn and sent her into the lake.

Everyone came to his party, though. Draco even allowed the Hufflepuffs, since Terry's secret boyfriend was one and all.

Terry ruined this magnificent gesture by dropping Zacharias Smith the day before Draco's party.

"He was - I was using him," Terry said to Draco before Draco's enormous inebriation had fully taken hold. "It wasn't okay."

"Sounds okay to me," Draco remarked, and then became sentimental. "But it wasn't like you."

"I was really scared for you," Terry continued. "I wish - I wish I'd trusted you more."

Draco looked into the middle distance. "I wasn't trustworthy," he answered. "Anyway. It turned out for the best."

He smiled, and Terry smiled his hesitant familiar smile back. About that moment Potter gave up on ominous lurking around them, and came to put his arm around Draco's shoulders. "Hi, Terry," he said, his voice full of dark suspicion, and tugged Draco closer against him.

Potter was absurd: it was probably incurable at this point. Draco leaned back on his elbows in the sun and tipped his face up.

Somewhere in the distance, and receding fast, Weasley muttered about how he'd known it was coming and he would've preferred it if Potter was going out with anyone else. Anyone! He would have accepted anyone!

Fortunately at this point Draco got Crabbe to slip Weasley some more Firewhiskey and the Great Six Year Weasley/Granger Foreplay reached a happy conclusion through the beautiful magic of alcohol.

Weasley was even drunk enough to dance with her and, given the crowd of people dancing on the lawn by then, was able to hide his shame in the crush of other bodies. Ginny was dancing with Dean, Cho with Michael, Pansy (surprisingly) with Anthony and Blaise Zabini (terrifyingly) with Elspeth Moonfeather.

Draco, seated comfortably on the lawn where he could observe his party and be quite sure it was the best one ever, was starting to get very concerned about Goyle.

Meanwhile Potter was talking to Zacharias Smith. Well, Potter was looking away abstractedly while Smith gazed at him with barely concealed longing, but still!

The force of Draco's narrowed eyes over the glasses glare clearly shamed Potter out of his wandering ways, and he came over to sit by Draco. Draco was about to bring up the subject of Potter being a vile philanderer, but Potter forestalled him by asking if Draco wanted to dance.

He looked steeled to make the endeavour. Draco laughed and laughed.

"Spare me," he said. "I saw you at the Yule Ball. I've been through a lot of traumatic experiences already this year: I want to live."

Potter shoved him. Draco promptly shoved him back. Potter, who was a vicious Gryffindor and might not have realised how much Draco'd had to drink, shoved him too hard and Draco tipped over.

The lawn was soft, the sun was shining, Potter was hovering over him with his breath coming fast.

Wasn't a bad birthday, by any means.

"C'mon," Draco said. "Don't you know what to do with a boy on his back in the grass when you've got him?"

"Well - no," said Potter. "But I've got a few ideas."

*

Everything got messy near the end of term. Always had, really. For Dumbledore's end of term speech Draco supposed they'd all return to the correct house tables.

"D'you think Pansy would like me to sit with her?" Anthony asked wistfully on the morning before the last day of term. "Or - tolerate it, even."

"Oh baby, baby," Draco said. "Tolerate me harder."

Anthony elbowed him in the ribs. "I'd hurt you. Only it'd be a shocking waste of our House points."

The mention of House points sent Draco into beautiful contemplation of Ravenclaw's upcoming glorious victory, and the Great Hall's soon-to-be beautiful swathing in cool delightful blue. Hahaha! Death to Gryffindor!

Metaphorically speaking.

"I still think Slytherin should've got house points," Crabbe said, spooning up porridge in a decided manner. "We helped. Not that I was sure which side we were helping, but I suppose it turned out for the best. I suppose I wouldn't want to see Goldstein lynched. Not actually lynched."

"Thank you, sweet Vincent," said Anthony.

"Or Hermione," Terry put in.

Crabbe looked thunderstruck. "Hermione's Muggleborn? Well, I think somebody could have mentioned that to me before!" He glared accusingly around, and then said: "Anyway, if you'd just worked out a way for us to be animals instead we could've told Professor Dumbledore about helping. I'm not telling the headmaster that I wore a pinafore for great justice."

Everyone seemed to be labouring under the delusion that this had been Draco's plan all along. Draco suppressed a pang of guilt and tried to soothe his conscience with jam.

"Look, I couldn't arrange you being an Animagus on such short notice," he informed Crabbe, industriously spreading. "Ravenclaws are only omniscient gods in training. Anyway, maybe that was my plan. To take all the credit for myself. Devilish cunning!"

Crabbe waited until Draco was finished with his dramatic cackle.

"Not supposed to be cunning, are you?" he pointed out. "That's our lot. Pass the honey."

"Well, you know, Vincent," Anthony said. "I don't think you and Greg are all that cunning. Sorry."

Crabbe considered this. "I don't know," he said at last. "Goyle's been wearing really subtle make-up for half a year now and nobody's noticed. That's pretty cunning."

There was a terrible silence. Draco really needed to have a talk with Goyle.

The silence was interrupted by the arrival of Potter, whose presence at the Ravenclaw table had become a much more frequent thing since the Great Granger and Weasley Alliance. Oh Hermione, it broke Draco's heart to see her throwing herself away like this.

Of course, the resulting effect had its benefits. Potter had a funny way of sitting sideways on a bench that had distressed Draco at first (hadn't even been taught how to sit correctly, probably the story about Muggles was a smokescreen, probably he'd been raised by bears) but which Draco had come to accept. Since it provided Draco with comfortable leaning-against-chest opportunities.

He took one of these opportunities now, and a kiss that left a bit of jam on Potter's jaw. "Hi."

"Hey," said Potter, grinning at him and tucking him in closer. "So. I finished the reading list."

Draco put down his knife. "Oh, Potter. Oh, you've made me so happy. Oh, talk to me about literary criticism, it gets me all hot and bothered."

"Are you two ever going to, um, start calling each other by your first names?" inquired Anthony, who had no sense for Private and Sexually Charged Reading List Moments.

"Silence, Goldstein," Draco said with a wave of his hand. "Potter here clearly has a natural sense of decorum." He paused and rubbed his nose against the side of Potter's throat. "No-one," he added, "could be more surprised than me."

Kevin Entwistle at this point caused a sensation by clearing his throat, putting down his spoon and actually focusing on someone. Namely, Potter.

"I've never liked you," he announced, and then returned to his rapt contemplation of the Hogwarts ceiling.

Potter said into Draco's ear, "Who is that guy? He's not in our year, is he?"

Draco turned his head and murmured back, "D'you think - before you vanquished him, I mean - the Dark Lord might have dropped you on your head as a child?"

These sweet nothings complete, Potter returned to the topic of his reading list. "Some of the books were - quite good," he said warily.

"Go on," Draco purred.

Potter went a little red, and then said: "And I didn't have anything else to read. All the copies of Quidditch Through the Ages are out of the library."

"Oh," Anthony said with an enlightened air, "that's what that big pile of books beside your bed is!"

"You're right, Ravenclaws aren't cunning," Draco admitted to Crabbe. "I think now is one of those times you should put your amulet in your mouth, Anthony. I did it out of love, Potter."

Anthony muttered about inhaler, for the last time, Draco and for some reason, Potter flushed even more and stared at Draco until Draco became uncomfortable.

"What?" he inquired.

"Nothing," said Potter, ducking his head and smiling at him somewhat helplessly. "So I finished the reading list. So, that means we go flying. That was the deal, right?"

Draco smirked. "Yeah."

Potter wasn't bad at the presents side of things, either. Draco did want to try out his new broom.

*

"Heh," Draco said. "Horcrux."

"You should probably stop saying that," Potter remarked.

They had maps of Godric's Hollow spread out on the tables of the Room of Requirement, and their brooms in a corner. Draco had anticipated spending less time in the Room now things were settled, but what with the out of house relationship and the having to plot to win the war and everything, that was not turning out to be the case.

"All right," Draco said, "but don't believe Romilda Vane if she tells you she has a Horcrux for you in her pants."

The corner of Potter's mouth twitched. "This is serious, Malfoy."

"Well, I know," Draco answered. "Mother wanted us to go to a villa in Greece this summer, I'll have you know, and I turned her down. Such is my commitment to the cause."

Well, apparently there were several more Horcruxes - heh heh - to get. And there was bloody Dumbledore, who was failing fast. And Draco wanted to be in England, anyway, it didn't particularly matter why.

"That's - good," Potter said. "Um. We'll be Owling and things, won't we?"

"I'd assumed so," Draco answered with intense suspicion. "Why, what are you trying to say?"

Maybe Potter was all about the chase! Maybe he'd developed an inappropriate attraction to Kevin Entwistle!

"Only - well, Bill Weasley and his girlfriend Fleur are getting married," Potter went on, looking studiously at the map while his neck went red. "I thought you should come. Um. As my, um, date."

"Fleur Delacour and a Weasley?" Draco demanded. "Inconceivable! She could speak four languages and had an innate grasp of Magical History, not to mention her transcendent beauty!" He stopped and reflected. "Oh. I mean, yes. But it's still a wicked waste."

"Bill's pretty cool," said Potter. "He's got an earring. And long hair, it's kind of-"

Draco eyed him coldly. "If you leave me for a Weasley, I will hunt you down like a dog in the street."

"I'm not leaving you for anyone," Potter said, then flushed, cleared his throat and said hurriedly: "Also will you come with me to Godric's Hollow?"

Draco, musing on the mysterious allure of the Weasleys, said "Yes," before he thought about it. Then he did think about it, about parents and Dumbledore and Dad and Mother, and the way Potter was going to get badly hurt, and the war was coming.

"I didn't," he said, and almost choked on the words. "Everyone thinks I meant it to happen the way it did. But I only decided to turn over the Death Eaters about-"

"About twenty minutes after they were in the school," Potter said quietly. "Yeah, I know."

Draco met his eyes over the table filled with maps, the false locket lying on the table between them. Potter's gaze was steady.

"You wouldn't have done anything like that," Draco said.

"No," Potter said. "But we're - different. It's okay. I get that. Um. I'm trying to get that."

Draco wondered if it had occurred yet to Potter that Ravenclaw was winning the House Cup, and if he would be as understanding about that. He suspected he might be in for another case of the Potter sulks tomorrow.

He grinned. "So you've been hiding my iniquity from general knowledge. Very sneaky."

"Well," Potter said, grinning back and smoothing out another map as he did so, looking down and then quickly up at Draco again. "The Sorting Hat did say I'd've done well in Slytherin."

"Oh, really," said Draco.

They exchanged another smile and Draco pushed up his glasses to see a map better or conceal from himself they were having a sentimental moment or something. He felt tired in a good way from all the flying, tired so when they'd gone through the maps they could relax and he'd have earned some rest.

Not, he added hastily to himself, that they were going to cuddle. Ravenclaws didn't cuddle. They curled up with a good book and any other good things that came to hand.

The clock struck midnight and, in the name of it being the last day, Draco let himself smile properly at Potter and then, despite all weariness, attempted the sexy glasses look.

"I always thought I'd've done well in Slytherin," he remarked. "But I suppose things worked out all right."

The End

