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Chapter 1 to 30

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Chapter: 1

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Chapter 1: In the Owlery

The sharp edge of the stone wall was digging into his back. Ignoring it, Draco glanced down to the left and pondered, briefly, the dizzying drop from the Owlery, which was located on the Northwest pinnacle of Hogwarts. He held the unfinished letter to his father his left hand, and, for an equally brief moment, considered dropping it out into the night. Watch his painstakingly-chosen words swirl away. It posed a fleetingly interesting question, considering whether the parchment would end up in the lake, the Forest, or somewhere else altogether. Imagine if it blew all the way to Wiltshire, to the Manor, and his father got it after all. His fist crumpled suddenly around the parchment, and Draco shoved it into his pocket - while managing to keep his balance. Malfoys, a voice from the past told him witheringly, do not falter.

A soft hooting called his attention back to the present. The large, snowy owl had fluttered down to perch on his right knee, and Draco gazed at her. "Hello," he said quietly. She hooted back, and Draco petted her head. He wondered what Potter would say if he knew that his own owl had befriended his nemesis of these six-and-some years. More than half. Draco shivered. The window was open, as always, and the late-February wind was bitterly chilling.

The door opened suddenly, as though the person behind had approached it at a run. Apparently, he had. Potter burst into the Owlery panting, as though he'd run all the way up from the Great Hall. Perhaps he had. Draco surveyed him silently, choosing which pithy slur to fling at him this time. The truth was, though, that he was tired of this game. Had been tired of it for some time. It was so much work, hating Potter. It was expected of him. But what if he just sat here and waited

for Potter to notice him? It was inevitable - Potter would surely come looking for the owl any moment now, and see him then. Draco rolled his eyes inwardly - the prat would probably think that Draco had turned his owl against him or something. Best say something before Draco was hexed off the window sill. Which might not have been a bad thing, all things considered. "Potter," he said quietly, breaking the silence.

Potter's eyes snapped to him from where they'd been combing the rafters. "Malfoy!" he said, clearly surprised. Then - "Hedwig! What are you doing down here?" The green eyes cut to Draco, not quite accusing, but definitely suspicious.

"I haven't done anything to her, Potter," Draco said, with an overly dramatic sigh and eye-roll. "She just came down of her own accord. Honest." He suddenly wished that the owl would get off his knee.

Hedwig, that was her name. She gave his finger a not-so-gentle bite, as though picking up on his unwelcoming vibes, and turned to Potter, obligingly holding out her leg. "Not so fast, girl," Potter said, his expression unreadable. "I haven't written the letter yet."

"Then why'd you come charging up here, then?" Draco countered.

Potter gave him a long, even stare - a far cry from the nervous, reactive child he'd been nearly seven years ago. Or even two years ago. "I just - wanted to make sure I didn't forget," he said, shrugging. "And I just had to get out of the Great Hall - it's always so crowded in there."

"I know it is," Draco said, feeling odd. Funny that Potter should have used his own words like that.

Potter shifted his weight, then began searching in his pockets for a quill. Idly, Draco wondered if he kept an inkwell in there, too. But, sure enough, Potter soon said, "Shit. I don't - "

"Have any ink, I know," Draco said, still watching him. "I'd have been surprised if you did keep ink on you at all times, you prat."

Potter's head snapped up and he was glaring. "Shut up! What ARE you doing here, anyway? Just sitting there, playing with my owl?"

Draco forced his temper down. Potter always managed to hit the right buttons for him, somehow. "For your information, POTTER, I am - was - writing a letter." He couldn't resist a little sarcasm. "People do that, you know - not just you."

He gave his knee a little jerk, trying to dislodge the owl. She merely gave him a reproachful look, then hopped off towards Potter. Potter was hesitating. "Then why're you still here?" he asked, definitely suspicious now. "Are you spying on people's mail now, or something?"

Draco rolled his eyes full-out this time. "Oh, please," he said, mustering his sarcasm. "You really think I have nothing better to do than that."

Potter paused again, thinking. "Well, kind of, yes," he said. And suddenly he looked older than seventeen, his eyes hooded and his face almost gaunt. "I seem to remember you doing a fair bit of spying for Umbridge, back in the day."

Draco was truly annoyed now. "Don't talk about that woman," he said irritably. "You know I was only doing it because - no, never mind. I'm not going to tell you. I don't have to explain myself to you."

"Son of a Death Eater, about to become one himself, and I don't get to ask some questions?" Potter shot back, his voice menacing. At just an inch shy of six feet, he was still an inch shorter than Draco, but he suddenly looked every inch of his height. His eyes clouded over and narrowed.

It was almost frightening, actually, but Draco's fury rose and spilled over. He forced it to ice over before leaving his mouth, though. "That shows how little you know about me, then," he hissed, voice glacially cold. "You know NOTHING about me, Potter. Nothing." Draco pushed himself off the window sill and past Potter, whose owl hooted disconsolately. His hand on the door handle, Draco whirled around again. Potter looked startled.

"You know," Draco said, forcing his voice to stay even, "some people might consider it just as bad to make assumptions like that about people as they would to have prejudices against wizards of muggle parentage. DON'T go getting all self-righteous on me. You're not me, and you have no ideal what it means to be dealing with the shit I've got going on. Just do me a favour and leave me alone." With that, Draco wrenched the door open, stalked through it and slammed it behind him. As he pounded down the staircase, he could just hear Potter's owl hooting softly again.

* * *

Down in his dorm, Draco was inexplicably out of sorts with everybody and everything. He couldn't really put it all down to a couple of stupid, ignorant comments by Potter, but they had touched a nerve. He wondered again whether he should have sent the damned letter or not. Whether he should still consider sending it or not. The thought plagued him. He shrouded himself within his bed curtains and attempted to ignore the noise without.

A sock ball hit the curtains, and Blaise Zabini's nasal voice cut through Draco's attempt at quiet introspection. "Hey, Draco! I'm borrowing your thugs and going for a fly. Wanna come?"

Not with you, Draco's inner monologue snarked. Without pulling back the curtains, he snarled, "No! I'm trying to do something here. Leave me alone."

The voice was closer now, and even more annoying. "Ahhh, why didn't you just tell me you were wanking, buddy?"

Draco could all but see Zabini's grin. "Fuck off, Zabini! I am not wanking!" He was more than annoyed. He was pissed.

Blaise's hand appeared, clenching a handful of curtain, and next second, he yanked it back. His foolishly handsome face appeared in the gap, first grinning, then looking disappointed. "Oh, you're not," he said, seeming genuinely surprised.

"No, I'm not, and get out of here!" Draco spat.

"Sure you don't want to come flying?"

"Yes! Gods, what does a person have to do to be left alone these days?!" Draco felt his face flushing with anger and frustration, both of which he knew would slide right off Zabini.

Who shrugged. "Sure, okay. Be like that." He dropped the curtain. Draco heard him calling out to Crabbe, then to Nott, heard their voices answering him. Zabini fancied himself nearly as popular as Draco, and he almost had the charisma to be a ringleader. He was also freely, openly

bisexual, willing to shag anything that didn't move away from him too quickly, and Draco sometimes wondered why he had not yet taken advantage of this fact. Zabini was quite attractive, actually, and as discreet as one could be when one had buggered half of Hogwarts or more by now. It had more to do with not wanting to engage in something as obviously common as shagging the school broom, but Draco could not quite place what that elusive other reason was.

The dorm was finally quiet, as Goyle clumsily shut the door after attempting to close it on his own foot first. Draco let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Pulled out the parchment and read it again. Re-reading bits of the un-posted letter, Draco felt the despair creeping up again, threatening to overwhelm him. He thought of going back up to the Owlery, but dismissed the thought. It was one of the few places where he felt he could breathe in this crowded castle. It wasn't even that crowded, but everything made Draco feel claustrophobic these days. He had a huge decision make, and no one to talk to about it. He didn't need anyone; he just needed a little space. A little peace.

His fist closed around the parchment again, and he tossed it aside. If he decided to send it, he could always rewrite it. Well, he'd have to, now. Draco folded his arms beneath his head and laid back to think about everything. It was no use, he thought, a few minutes later, angry and frustrated still more. His thoughts were going in circles. But then he'd disown me. I could handle that. But who would I go to? Not Dumbledore. Dumbledore equals Potter, and I will not go to Potter. Stupid, narrow-minded, superior, self-righteous arsehole.

Absentmindedly, Draco's hand wandered down to his crotch. Zabini had actually had a good idea there; the dorm was empty now and determined to be for at least a little while. His homework was finished. What better way to occupy his time? Draco shifted a little, opened his robes and unfastened his trousers. Drawing out his soft cock, he began to massage gently, thinking random thoughts of a more pleasant nature now. His own lack of experience bothered him rather greatly, but a person in his position could not afford to be indiscriminate. Queer or otherwise, Draco was not one to sleep around, like Zabini. And he'd be damned if he was going to settle for anyone less than worth his time. But his fantasy life was rich, and Draco lived in it more fully than he lived his actual life, some days. Most days, even. He closed his eyes and allowed his imagination to wander. His fist moved around the rapidly-hardening shaft in his hand, stroking along the length in a practised rhythm. He saw someone, anyone, just about, kneeling in front of him, lips moving over the head of his cock… his thumb grazed it, smearing the drop of clear fluid around over the sensitive skin. His other hand joined the first one, reaching behind to caress his balls, only in his mind's eye, it was someone else's hands… strong, square hands, maybe just a little rough, moving over his flesh… his cock was flushed now, pointing up toward his face, and Draco was arching into his hands. He heard his breath coming in little gasps and imagined he could hear someone else's, too; little explosions within the safe zone of his bed, a cock moving against his… he pressed one finger into his perineum, then back, against his opening - he gasped and shuddered, come spraying out onto his bedclothes, hands and robes. Still breathing hard a few minutes later, Draco reached gingerly into his pocket and

withdrew his wand, vanishing the mess.

It was no use. Even wanking wasn't helping him feel better about anything. And it certainly wouldn't get anything decided. Draco kept himself still and hated his life. Darkness closed in around him in the gloom of the empty dorm.

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Two nights later, he was back up in the Owlery. It was past midnight, and Draco was relieved. The castle was asleep, and he liked it best that way. Finally quiet. And the owls were mostly out, hunting. He almost had the place to himself. Too bad it was so damned cold. Once again, Draco found himself staring at a blank piece of parchment. *Dear Father,* he'd written. The rest was empty; his quill hung limply between listless fingers. How to say it.

The soft footfalls warned him only a split second before the door opened again. Draco looked up in annoyance - who could be bothering him now, at this hour? Wanly pale cheeks were the first thing he noticed, in place of the usual high colour. It was Potter. *Fuck, not again*, Draco thought wearily.

Potter saw him and stopped in his tracks. "Fuck," he muttered.

"Yes, exactly my sentiments," Draco sneered back. "Close the door behind you, Potter."

Potter's lips tightened. "I'm not leaving," he said stubbornly. "I have every right to be here."

Draco sighed exaggeratedly. "I meant, close the behind you as you enter the fucking Owlery, you twat."

Potter looked as though he was going to flare up, but managed to quell the urge, and simply turned and closed the door. "Have you seen Hedwig?"

Draco hesitated, contemplating telling Potter that she'd committed feathery suicide and flung herself to an untimely death on the grounds below, but decided against it. He liked the owl, if not her owner. "No. She wasn't here when I got here."

Potter's green gaze focused on him. "How long have you been here?"

Draco felt his own lips compress a little. "What does it matter?"

Potter shrugged. "Just asking," he said.

"Long enough," Draco said, suddenly weary again. He looked out the window. "An hour or two, I guess."

"Do you ever worry you're going to fall?" Potter asked, just a hint of worry lacing his voice.

Draco restrained himself from asking what the Gryffindor cared if he fell or not, but simply assumed a haughty tone of voice. "Malfoys don't falter."

"Ah." The tone had turned dry, but Potter had come a step or two closer. "My mistake."

"Yes, it was. What are you doing here? Come to check up on the Death Eater-to-be?" Draco turned his cool, steely gaze to the other.

Potter shifted his weight again; it was a nervous habit of his. "No," he said. "I actually just came to visit Hedwig. Pathetic, I know," he added, face twisting slightly, waiting for Draco to agree scathingly.

Draco thought of it, but let the urge pass. He shrugged. "Not really," he said impassively. "It's a good place to get away from… the rest of it."

Potter nodded. "I know it is," he said. It wasn't quite an agreement, nor a correction. Just a statement. "What are you doing here?"

Draco turned his gaze back to the Forest in the distance, stretching out darkly, unfathomably, across the grounds. "Just thinking."

Potter shifted again; Draco could see it out of the corner of his eye. "Uh, listen," Potter said, obviously uncomfortable, "about the other day - "

"Skip it," Draco interrupted. "I don't want to hear it." He kept his tone cool.

"No - Malfoy - just let me - "

"I don't need to hear insincere apologies," Draco said firmly. "You're right, I'm a terrible person. I have old-fashioned prejudices, thanks to my father. Granger and Weasley are right to hate me, too; I've been an arse to them for the past seven years. It's fine. You don't have to pretend things are any different than they ever were. I know you feel you need to play the hero in my case, too, but you don't. You're allowed to be a bastard sometimes yourself. I seem to be one of the only people in the world who knows you're just a regular person like the rest of us."

Potter paused, absorbing all of this. If it stung him, he was hiding it well. There was only a trace of bitterness in his voice when he spoke again. "Except you, right?" he said tersely. "You were always better. Pureblood, richer than anything, f - "

"If you say one word about my father, I will hex your balls into next year," Draco interrupted, his voice dangerous.

Potter stopped. Their eyes met for a moment. "Sorry," Potter said, and appeared to mean it. Draco didn't doubt that he did - Gryffindors were famous for their guilt complexes.

Draco took advantage of the moment. "I still hate you," he said shortly. "There's no reason for it not to be mutual."

This time, Potter did look hurt. "Well, I'm sorry for existing!" he snapped, twin spots of colour coming into his unusually pale cheeks. "I wanted to apologize, because I, unlike you, am *not* a complete and utter bastard all of the time, and I wanted to tell you that I was sorry for jumping to conclusions about you. I should have known better than to have wasted your precious time."

"It's really more the interrupting of my solitude that gets to me," Draco told him coldly. "So, I'd appreciate it if you'd go now."

Potter crossed his arms childishly. "You know, I came here for a bit of solitude and peace, too, you know. It's not my fault this damned castle is so full of people that a person has to stay up all night, trying to get some space - " he stopped, realizing that Draco was staring at him oddly. "What?"

Draco continued to stare. "Nothing," he said eventually. He turned away. "Apology accepted." In the distance, a small, white speck appeared, heading toward him. As it neared, Draco said, "Your owl is back, by the way."

"What?" Potter's voice came from near the door. Apparently he had been about to leave, after all.

Draco made a small, cautious gesture toward the outside, making sure to keep his balance. "Your owl," he repeated, unwilling to say its name in front of Potter.

Potter came over. "Hedwig!" He held out his arm, and the snowy owl landed on it gracefully. Potter patted her, his face becoming unusually gentle and affectionate. Draco hadn't ever seen it look that way before. It was oddly mesmerizing. "How are you, girl?" he asked, as though the owl could talk back. Well, that was fair - Draco talked to her, too.

Potter glanced up then. An look of wavering uncertainty came over his face. "You - er - you know her, too, don't you?" he asked, as though he didn't already know that.

Draco nodded reluctantly, and reached out to run his crooked finger over the owl's beak. She was making friendly advances toward him, and it would have been rude not to respond, he felt. A playful nip, and Draco repressed a smile. He hadn't grown up around animals, save his father's pretentious eagle owl. Hedwig was friendly. Like Potter was, at least to other people. "What would you say," Draco began abruptly, "if you knew I had been writing to my father to tell him that I'm not going to take the Dark Mark?"

Potter froze. Then he recovered, finding his voice. His eyes were almost frighteningly intense, seeming to shoot green sparks at him. "Is that what you're doing?" he demanded.

"No, so don't get all worked up about it," Draco said coolly. "I just wanted to know how you'd react."

Potter's shoulders seemed to drop a little. "Well, I'd be glad," he said, almost defiantly. He went back to petting his owl, not looking at Draco.

"Glad?"

"Sure," Potter said, too quickly. "I mean, anyone on our side is good, isn't it? My side, I mean. And - it would be good if you weren't - if you didn't - "

"I wouldn't be on your side," Draco told him rudely. "I just wouldn't be a Death Eater."

A mask of sorts came up over Potter's features then. A look of practised indifference. "Ah," he said. "I see. Well. Fine. I should go to bed. It's late."

Draco's lips quirked, but he didn't say anything.

Potter seemed uncertain as to what to do with his owl, leave her with Draco, or transfer her to a roosting perch. Hedwig made up her own mind, though, and flew over to the large, communal food dish. Potter strode to the door without looking back at Draco. Just as the door was about to close, Draco called out after him. "Potter."

He stopped, but didn't turn. "What?" The tone was flat, emotionless.

"Aren't you going to ask whether I'm going to - do that, or not?"

Potter seemed to be deliberating. Finally, he said, still not looking at Draco, "You're just playing games with me, Malfoy. I'm not falling for that."

Draco was a little stung. Since when did he "play games" with Potter?! "If you don't care, then fine," he said, unable to think of a better response in the time allotted.

Another pause. Then, "You're right, I don't care," Potter said, then closed the door. Draco could hear him stalking down the stairs.

Stupid, arrogant bastard! Draco almost fell out of the window, he was so upset by Potter's terse response. He couldn't admit to himself that not even Potter cared about his existence any more. At least in the past, Draco'd been able to make him angry, flushed to the point of fury. Now all he could get was indifference. He buried his face in his hands, head throbbing, mind spinning, firmly denying to himself the fact that he wanted, more than anything, to cry. For what, he didn't know, exactly. For his own, empty, worthless life, perhaps. For the fact that Harry Potter, so-called saviour of the world (to be), who was rumoured to be such a nice person to everyone else, hated him so very much that he'd simply stopped even caring which side Draco was on.

A small voice in Draco's head reminded him that he'd been a complete and utter jerk throughout the encounter, and that perhaps he'd deserved it. *But bloody hell, he interrupted me brooding,* Draco thought angrily. He stopped trying to suppress the pain. It rose up and swallowed him, and he lost himself in it.

Sometime after three, he uncurled himself stiffly and made his way - undramatically and very much anti-climatically - down to his cold bed. He slept for four hours and got up for class the next morning, hating life possibly more than he ever had before. He was a thoroughly unlikeable person, and his life was entirely devoid of any meaning at all. Good. Draco ate his toast slowly, alone, and went to Charms.

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Chapter: 2

Chapter 2: Night in the Slytherin Dorm

Draco woke during the night - not suddenly, as though something had startled him, but something had definitely disturbed his slumber. He listened. The sounds were… sort of familiar, somehow. Ah. Flesh moving against flesh, that's what it was. Someone was wanking and hadn't, damn them, had the courtesy to Silence the area around his bed. Draco attuned his ears to the sounds, determined to pinpoint first who the culprit was, before reaming him out. Then he caught something else, though -

"Dammit, Goyle, lie still!"

It was Zabini's voice, roughened with desire and domination. Draco heard the sound of a hand

slapping against skin, a thigh, perhaps. He opened his mouth, but Goyle's answer cut him off.

"Faster, Blaise, please! Fuck!"

Draco dimly registered a wave of horror. It wasn't one of Zabini's sick bondage games; Goyle was into it! Seemingly paralysed, he continued to listen against his will.

Heard Zabini grunt, heard the sound of flesh whispering on flesh again. "Gods, Goyle, you're tight."

Draco's cock swelled despite himself, and a rush of arousal made its way south, blocking his rebuke. He snaked his hands into his silk pyjama pants, keeping himself quiet.

Zabini swore softly, and Draco could hear his movements speeding up. Goyle was whimpering under his breath, but it did not seem to be a sound of pain. Although when he next said, "Blaise…", his voice was thick with tears.

"Shut the fuck up!" Zabini commanded, voice even rougher, straining. "*Fuck*, Goyle, oh fuck, fuck…"

"Harder!" Goyle begged.

Draco's breath scraped raggedly over his teeth between trembling lips. He'd been cold before; now he could feel his face flushing, like his cock, warmed by his hands, questing toward that release, which was curling up from his toes this time, stomach clenching. He was seeing, in his mind's eye, Zabini's large hand fisted around Goyle's prick, yanking, wrenching it towards climax, forcing it, swollen in his hand and slapping against it, eager for more - Draco shuddered and pumped into his own hands *harder*, almost as though something in him was seconding Goyle's plea.

Goyle cried out - it was stifled partway through - Draco imagined Zabini's hand slapping roughly over his mouth, and was, for a moment, consumed with jealousy. Even *Goyle* was getting some - but Draco's brow creased in a concentration which was almost like pain, *almost there*, and *fuck*… Zabini grunted again, a long one, and his movements were arrested. Draco could almost feel the spurt within himself, though he'd only felt it in his dreams before - he came into his hand, and it was hot. The temperature of his heart, he supposed idly, stifling the sound of

his breathing.

His ears seemed to clear, opening to other sounds again. He could hear Zabini and Goyle both panting, heard the small, almost-stifled sound of Nott coming in his pants and hand - obviously, he'd been woken by the lovebirds - Draco thought the term with derision - too. Draco reached for his wand and cleared away the mess. Waking up in a sticky, half-dried puddle of his own come did not appeal to him. Meanwhile, part of Draco was humiliated to find himself doing the same thing as that little lurker, Nott - getting off on hearing someone else having sex, while he made do with listening and his own palm - and the rest of him didn't care; he was too consumed with a momentary (if frequent) longing for the real thing.

There was a moist sound, and Zabini was sliding out of Goyle. They were evenly matched for size; Goyle had always been the larger, taller one of Draco's thugs, as Zabini had called them, only a few days before. Zabini ambled over to his own bed without another word to Goyle. Draco wondered, with a fleeting feeling of almost-pity, if it had been Goyle's first time, and whether he was sore now. He had, at least according to Draco's perceptions, enjoyed himself thoroughly. But that didn't mean - another surge of jealousy rose up. How had that even come about? He'd had no idea that Goyle was gay. They'd been - well, if not friends, exactly, then companions, or something - for nearly seven years now! Had Zabini simply sidled over to Goyle, murmured a proposition, then thrown him down onto his own bed and shagged him senseless? Had it been going on for awhile? Was it just sex? It wasn't exactly that he needed to know what Goyle, of all people, did to get himself off - but a part of Draco was hurt - yes, he could admit the word, if only in his head - that Goyle hadn't ever told him. Wouldn't ever tell him.

So many questions, and no one to put them to. Draco didn't even consider asking Goyle about it. Goyle was not really one for conversation, anyway. Draco sighed and turned over - quietly, so as not to attract attention to himself. *I am seventeen*, he thought with a pang. *And I am so very alone. Surrounded, but alone.*

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The next night, nothing untoward happened. Everyone, at least as far as Draco could tell, stayed in his own bed. He quietly lit his wand and pulled out another sheet of parchment, to begin a new letter.

Dear Father, he wrote, then paused to think, choosing his words carefully. Maybe if he got them out right this time, he'd be able to send it.

How are you? I hope that you and Mother are both well. I am writing to let you know that I have been doing a lot of thinking lately, and that I feel strongly that I would rather not take sides in the coming war. I regard this as a very Slytherin position, and hope you will agree: Dumbledore's side is very strong, and I feel confident that, regardless of how you or I feel about it, he will win. I would rather not be on the losing side when that happens. However, I do not mean to join him, if that makes you feel any better about it. But the bottom line is that I am not going to be Marked.

I understand that you will be upset and possibly quite angry about this, but all I can do is offer you my apologies and hope that you will come to see it as I do. I have been trying to write you about this for weeks.

Draco paused and considered his last sentence. Then, carefully, ran his wand over it and murmured, "Evanesco." A sign of weakness, admitting that - that's how his father would see it. He went on.

I feel that it is a defensible position and will leave me open to make whatever decisions I feel appropriate once the war has ended. I hope you do not feel that I have betrayed the Malfoy line with this decision, but I will understand if you feel that I have, or if you should decide not to support it.

Otherwise, I am fine. My grades are as good as always, and I am working hard. Please give my love to Mother and tell her that I hope she is well.

Your dutiful son,
Draco L. Malfoy

It was a short letter, yet Draco felt as though he had just run a marathon. And he still couldn't decide whether to send it or not. Every word of it was true. He read it for a fifth time. He didn't want to join Potter and his band of self-righteous jerks. Nor did he want to become a Death Eater - and he was more adamant on this point than on any other.

As he lay still, thinking, Draco finally came to an inevitable conclusion: sooner or later, he was going to have to talk to Dumbledore.

In the morning, he mailed the letter. At least Potter was down at breakfast instead of up in the Owlery, for once. Small mercies, Draco reminded himself, and went silently downstairs in search of some toast.

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Three mornings later, Draco got his reply. He turned slightly away from Blaise, Crabbe and Goyle (who were all acting just the same as always, to Draco's private annoyance) to disguise the shaking in his hands. Merlin, his father's owl, was sitting calmly, importantly, on the table, waiting. The letter was brief, and read:

Draco,

I do not know what you mean in presuming to send me such trash. First of all, I was not under the impression that I had ever offered you a choice in the matter of your loyalties. You will be Marked. This should be simple enough for even you to understand. No questions. It will happen on your next visit home, which will be shortly. Secondly, there is no neutral position when it comes to our Master. There is loyalty, and there is betrayal. No doubt your time under your headmaster's influence had muddied your perceptions into vague, youthful idealism. I will not tolerate it. You will owl me at once to assure me of your change of plans.

Lucius Octavian Circinus Alastair Carrey-Ridgeworth Malfoy III

"What's that, Draco?" Zabini wanted to know, his nasal voice cutting into the quietly-building panic speaking in Draco's inner monologue.

Being interrupted did nothing for his mood. "Shove off, Zabini," Draco shot back, already rising from the table. He used his full six feet to tower over his seated Housemate and glowered down. "Stay out of my business, just for once, alright?"

Zabini just smirked. "Sounds like a serious case of sexual frustration, buddy - have I ever told you that a good shag will do much to relieve that?"

Draco's eyes cut to Goyle without meaning to. The other was staring into his plate, a dull flush creeping into his cheeks. Suddenly, Draco hated Zabini with all of his might. Cold fury rose from his gut, making his eyes dark and his face as white as ice. "I am *not* your buddy," Draco said, through clenched jaws, "and stay away from me." He looked at Goyle again, and contemplated adding, "and my friends," but decided to leave it. Regardless of how it had ended, Goyle had gone into it willingly, and hadn't exactly chosen to confide in Draco, so he could lie in his own bed now, as it were. Goyle glanced up then and caught Draco's eye. Draco just let the silence simmer between them for a moment, then turned on his heel and stalked out of the hall.

The parchment in his hand was nearly crumpled, and Merlin was following him. Draco could feel eyes on him from all quarters of the Great Hall - including, damn him, from Potter. Stupid jerk! Draco's fury became subtly more noticeable, and he felt colour flooding his face as the doors closed behind him. For lack of a better response, Draco skipped all of his classes and hid out in the Owlery.

He refused to admit that he wanted someone to come up and force him to talk about it - like a friend, say. That was it. He wanted a friend.

No, he didn't. Draco threw his father's letter out the open window with such force that he nearly toppled after it. Potter's owl hooted softly from her perch and came to sit down near him. He refused to admit that he was coming to think of the owl as a friend. Owls were not friends. They were just birds.

Merlin was circling the castle in wait. Draco averted his eyes every time the silver eagle owl flew into view.

The only person who came into the Owlery all day was a second-year Hufflepuff who was far too scared of Draco to say a word - he simply grabbed at a school owl and posted his letter in under thirty seconds and scurried off again.

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It was something of a miracle that Snape had actually given him the password to Dumbledore's office, Draco thought that night, as he stood before the Headmaster's door. "Come!" the reedy, old voice called. Draco swallowed and went inside.

He had never been inside the old wizard's office before, and he couldn't help looking around with interest - though Draco was far more concerned with the wizard behind the desk than those sleeping in the frames. He wondered if they were really asleep, or just faking it. He turned away and looked at Dumbledore, who was surveying Draco over the tops of his half-moon spectacles. "Draco," the Headmaster said, and he sounded only faintly surprised, to his credit, to see Draco there.

"Headmaster," Draco said tersely. "I have a problem."

"Please," Dumbledore said, waving him to a seat. "Sit down. What do you take in your tea?"

Surprised by this unexpected civility, Draco took a seat. "Just milk," he returned. For some reason, people always assumed that he took sugar - and lots of it, too - in his tea, but he didn't. Milk. Nothing else. Just enough to take the edge off the tannin.

Dumbledore smiled, as though to himself, added milk and passed Draco a cup and saucer. Then he sat back, picked up his own tea, and said - with admirable lack of preamble - "So." And waited.

Draco found himself wondering suddenly whether Potter had sat in this very same chair and agonized over his problems to Dumbledore before - no, it was really more likely that Potter had stomped around all over the place, ranting about his problems instead - with Dumbledore trying to get him to sit down and drink tea all the while. And although he was annoyed with himself for thinking of Potter *again*, Draco was compelled to smile at the image. "Well - er - sir," Draco fumbled - reminding himself that Malfoys do not fumble - "it's - it's pretty simple, really. I don't want to become a Death Eater, but my father isn't really giving me a choice about it, and I don't know what to do."

He took a sip of tea - more than he'd meant to - and it burned his mouth. His hands were suddenly shaking again - this was it - the moment he'd been waiting for. Draco Malfoy was betraying his father. He set the cup and saucer down on his knee, where they briefly rattled together before he let go of the cup.

Dumbledore set his own cup down rather deliberately. After a moment, he said, "Ah." Then he pulled off his spectacles and began to polish them on his robes. While he was still doing this, he asked, not looking up at Draco, "And you plan on defying him."

"Yes," Draco said quietly.

"And you require my… assistance?"

Draco looked to the side. He'd known this would be difficult. But he had no choice. "Yes."

Dumbledore picked up his tea. "Does your father know this?"

"He knows my intentions, sir. He… owled me this morning, strongly - encouraging me to… reconsider."

Dumbledore's gaze was somehow both piercing and gentle at once. "Reconsider?" he repeated carefully.

Draco gave up. "He told me that I had no choice. That I'll be Marked the next time I go home. I… can't go home. Sir."

"No, you can't," Dumbledore agreed musingly. "Even if you had owled him at once after receiving his letter - I've been noticing his owl about the castle all day - he would still be suspicious. It wouldn't be safe for you. It is practically guaranteed that his suspicions will be aroused now. Are you aware that Dark revels have been held in the dungeons at the Manor?"

Draco winced. "I - suspected, sir - but I didn't know, exactly."

"Ah." The word was eloquent in its understanding. "May I ask what else he might have said? Or what you said?"

Draco cleared his throat uncomfortably, then took another sip of tea. It burned. "I said that I wanted to stay neutral in the war and that I hoped he wouldn't see it as a betrayal. He basically said that his… master would view it as one, and that he wouldn't permit me to do it. He called it

youthful idealism."

"It is not idealism to know that one does not want to become a Dark wizard," Dumbledore said sharply. "I am very glad that you have come to me, Draco. I know that the circumstances for an alliance between the Malfoy family and myself such as this are not ideal - I assume you are here because you feel you have been driven to it. Am I correct?"

"I have been driven to it," Draco agreed, his tone neutral. He looked away again as he spoke. "And I'm not - I don't represent my family. Only myself."

"Of course." Again, the supremely gentle understanding. "What I wanted to assure you was that, regardless of the circumstances of your… position in the war, you will always be welcome on this side. You do not need to become friends with the Gryffindors. You will not need to join any clubs, groups or orders. All I will ask is that you keep your word."

"I haven't offered my word," Draco said evenly, finally meeting those eyes.

"I know. I will be asking for it shortly, though, and I think you know this." The gaze was returned steadily.

Draco nodded and sighed.

"I will protect you," Dumbledore said, "on pain of death, if you will swear allegiance to me."

Blackmail. Draco thought the word, but almost without bitterness. The question fought its way up. "Is that what you and Snape worked out?"

"Professor Snape," Dumbledore corrected, but he nodded at the same time. "I apologize if it seems like blackmail, but a circumstance like this goes beyond the measure of regular student/headmaster relations. If you were being abused or something along those lines at home, the circumstances would obviously be different than those from another student's. However, we are discussing war and allegiances - you came to me, I assume, as the head of the Order and Army which I command, rather than as student to headmaster - otherwise, you would have gone to your head of House. Yes?"

"Yes," Draco conceded. And no, he hadn't known that Dumbledore had an army. One with Potter at the front of the lines? Or at the back?

"I therefore need to consider the security of my ranks," Dumbledore said, and any concept Draco had once had of the wizard being a semi-senile, muggle-loving old coot were forever banished by those words. "I cannot doubt your loyalty if I am to keep you near me throughout the war. Do you understand?"

Draco nodded, even as his pulse raced. "Yes. I understand."

"Good boy," Dumbledore said. "Then I will ask for your word: you must swear to me that you will serve me and those whom I command for the duration of this war. The terms will be these: when Voldemort and his servants are dead or sufficiently suppressed, the war shall be declared over. Will you fight with me and for me and that for which I stand?"

Draco recognized the formal wording as the coding of a Wizard's Oath. Dumbledore held out his right hand, and Draco laid his in the old man's, palm to palm. "I will. I swear it."

Fawkes gave a quavering note that jarred the too-still air within the study.

Dumbledore's other hand closed over his. "Welcome, Draco," he said quietly. "I know you didn't want to have to come to this. I understand, though, and I am proud of you. I suggest that you talk to Professor Snape a good deal within the next few days. He will help you sort things out. Failing that - I do not know how close you are to Snape or how comfortable you would be in talking to him - and I *do* know that you and Harry have not got the best of relationships at the moment - but if you could manage it, I really think - "

"Thank you, Headmaster," Draco interrupted, pulling his hand away. "But I think I'll be fine."

The blue eyes were kindly, though thankfully showed no signs of amusement. Sadness, rather. "Very well, then," Dumbledore said. "Good night, Draco."

"Good night, sir." Draco got as far as the door before he stopped. Drew in a deep breath, then turned back. "Thank you," he said abruptly.

Dumbledore nodded quickly, and Draco left.

He felt oddly relieved. He made his way to the Owlery. A few minutes' careful observation proved that, first, the place was empty, and second, Merlin had given up on him and gone h - back to the Manor, Draco corrected mentally. Again, he felt exhausted - but now, relieved, too. He looked up into the rafters. "Hedwig?" he called softly, uncertainly. Not sure whether the owl was there or not.

But she fluttered down to perch on his knee, and Draco stroked her with a hand that just wouldn't stop shaking. She nipped his finger affectionately. Draco leaned back against the cold, stone window sill and let out his breath in a long, not-quite-steady sigh, closing his eyes.

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Chapter: 3

Chapter 3: Complications

"What do you think, Hedwig?" Draco's voice started out uneven, and a little higher than usual, but by the time he'd said the owl's name, he was already calmer. It was three days after he'd spoken with Dumbledore. Given his word. He'd said nothing to anyone, regardless of Dumbledore's advice to talk to Snape or, of all people, Potter.

The snowy owl looked him directly in the eye, very seriously, the amber eyes round in her white face. She ruffled her feathers as if to say that she didn't know, and to keep petting her, please. Draco made a *tsk*-ing sound and resumed stroking the owl's head. "You don't know, either, do you?" he murmured softly.

A low hoot, followed by another feather ruffle. "Right, never mind, then," Draco said absently.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Draco checked the time with a quick *tempus* spell. It was after three. Great. It could only be one person, at this hour, and the one he wanted to see least of all. The door opened and confirmed his suspicions, as Potter staggered wearily into the Owlery. Draco turned his attentions back to the owl, prepared to ignore Potter's presence in the hopes that he would leave quickly once he saw Draco there.

No such luck. "What are you doing here?" Potter demanded, his voice indignant. "And what are you doing with my owl again?"

Draco clenched his jaw, then forced himself to relax it. "First," he said tightly, "you do *not* own this room. I can come here whenever I want. And I'm certainly here a lot more than you are, so piss off. Secondly, your owl *chooses* to visit me. I am not doing *anything* to her. And maybe if you visited her more yourself, she wouldn't be lonely for company."

Potter's mouth fell open. Draco's words had hit the mark. There was a moment of silence while Potter just stood there, deliberating. Draco resumed petting the owl on his knee and ignoring Potter. "Fine," Potter said, marching over. "Maybe you're right. I don't spend very much time with Hedwig."

He held out his finger to the owl in what looked to be a reconciliatory gesture. Hedwig turned obligingly around on Draco's knee and nudged at Potter's finger with her beak. Draco quickly dropped his right hand and began to stroke Hedwig's back instead, with his left hand, lest his fingers touch Potter's by accident. That would be the last thing he needed - dealing with Potter thinking Draco was making advances on him, at three-thirty in the morning, in the Owlery. Perhaps Potter had the same thought, for he made certain not to go past the owl's head himself. Or maybe, Draco thought, his eyes narrowing, Potter was just clueless. He probably didn't even know that Draco preferred men.

"So," Potter said, in a voice of enforced calm - admirable, really, given his predilection to flying into fits of temper - "what are you doing here, now?"

Draco sighed gustily. This conversation again. "Didn't we just talk about this last week?" he asked nastily.

Potter was still for a moment, then shrugged. "So let's talk about it again," he said, side-stepping it.

"I am thinking," Draco said vaguely.

Potter looked up then, narrowing his eyes into slits. The colour was not obvious in the dark, but Draco had heard the rumours about Potter's eyes. Their shape, however, was really quite lovely,

framed by long, dark lashes. "Are you thinking about… what you said the other night?"

Draco sighed again. Potter was going to find out sooner or later. "Sort of," he said, hedging. Potter opened his mouth to ask another moronic question, but Draco cut him off. "Look, I can see you're not going to leave me alone until I tell you, so why don't I just go ahead and do it? Yes, I wrote that letter to my father. Yes, he hates me now. Yes, I'm never going home again, and yes, I've - joined Dumbledore." He couldn't look at Potter as he said this last.

"Really?" Potter asked, very seriously. "You - you did all that?"

Draco gave him a Look. "All what? Wrote a letter, set up my own disownment, and swore an oath. Yes. Spare me any Gryffindor pity, alright? I don't - "

"I wasn't going to pity you," Potter said coolly, cutting him off. "I was going to say that it was the first smart idea you've ever had."

The fury boiled up in Draco again. "Listen," he hissed, feeling his cheeks darken with anger, "I've had enough of your lip, Potter! I've said it before and I'll say it again - you know *nothing* about me - nothing! You have no idea what it means to have to have made the decisions I've been making lately! I don't want to hear another bloody word out of your mouth about this all! I haven't joined *you*; I've simply joined the man who's going to protect me against my own father, alright? So just shut up about it all!"

Potter froze. Then, without untensing in the least, said, "I'm sorry."

"Fuck you!" Draco snarled. "You don't know anything, you self-righteous little Gryffindor - saviour-complex-ridden *freak*." Hmm. Perhaps that was somewhat less creative than he'd sometimes managed, but the words had just come tumbling out.

Potter's jaw clenched - something in Draco's little string of insults had hit the mark - perhaps it was the saviour-complex bit. Then the Gryffindor deliberately forced his shoulders down again. "I said I was sorry," he said stiffly.

Draco felt his mouth take on its sarcastic twist. "Oh, and I suppose that just makes everything better, does it? Leave me alone."

Now Potter's lip twisted. "I guess it's too late to ask if you wanted to talk about it at all," he said, with something between a wince and a grimace. "I swear I'll try not to be such a git if you do."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Oh, right, I forgot - you're a bleeding-heart Gryffindor, you can certainly help the entire world and its problems. Thanks but no thanks."

"You're mistaking us with Hufflepuffs," Potter said, without moving or batting an eyelash. Which almost annoyed Draco even further - how dare Potter not be intimidated by his rage?

"I think I know what I'm dealing with," he returned, with a customary sneer.

Potter still refused to look even a bit agitated now - he was mastering himself. Damn him. "Well, I think it would be fair to say that you don't really know me at all, either," he said evenly. He ran his finger over the owl's beak again, and she nipped it in seeming affection. "She really seems to like you," he said musingly.

He almost didn't sound surprised, and Draco bit back the automatic insult, going back to the first. "I know what I need to know," Draco said instead, keeping his voice cool.

A flicker of - was it suspicion? - moved across Potter's face, but settled quickly back into his neutral expression. "I rather doubt you know me well at all, actually," was all he said.

Draco rolled his eyes again. "Look, Potter," he said tiredly, "it's really late. I came up here to be by myself, alright? Not to make small-talk with people I've hardly been friends with all these years. If I'd wanted that, you can bet that I'd have been outside Gryffindor Tower, begging your damned Fat Lady to let me in, give me Weasleys or give me death, something along those lines. I'm too tired for this tonight."

Potter gave him an odd, almost hooded look, and didn't say anything right away. Draco watched one olive/tan hand move over the owl's sleek head - he'd pulled his own hand away again, quickly. Then Potter looked up quickly and said, "Fine. I can go, if you want me to."

Draco let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Nodded. But before he could assent, a question occurred to him and asked itself before he could prevent it. "Why did you come here?"

"What?" Potter's head snapped up again, question marks imprinted over those eyes. "Oh. Never mind."

Another surge of annoyance went through him. "Oh, but you can question my movements and motivations all you like, is that it?" Draco asked, mouth twisting, eyes narrowed. "Fucking Gryffindor."

Potter's mouth tightened, and his eyes narrowed in return. "I - " he stopped abruptly, as though thinking better of what he'd been about to say. "Fine. I couldn't sleep, so I came up here just to… think, and stuff."

"Find another tower," Draco said rudely.

Potter's cheeks reddened. "You do not own this room, either, you fucking pouf!"

Draco swung his long legs down so fast that Hedwig nearly fell. She flapped her way back onto the window sill hooting indignantly, but Draco didn't notice. His fists were balled beside his thighs and he was shaking with fury now. "What did you say?" he demanded, through gritted teeth.

Potter took a step backward, looking uncertain. "I - "

Draco grabbed him by the front of his robes and shoved him against the stone wall beside the open window, his face hot, his eyes darkening. "Say that again!"

Potter just shrugged. "I just assumed," he said, suddenly nonchalant. "Sorry if I was wrong. No shame in it." His eyes came back to Draco's, suddenly, as though challenging the Slytherin to deny it.

Oh. Draco got it. His grip relaxed slightly, but then Potter had the nerve to smirk. "Defensive, aren't we?"

Draco pulled back his fist and punched Potter in the face. Hard. The blow fell across the

Gryffindor's cheek, hard enough to bruise. Without missing a beat, Potter grabbed Draco and swung him around, reversing their positions. And then Potter kissed him.

Too shocked to react immediately, Draco just froze in place as Potter's mouth suddenly met his, as hard as Draco's punch had been, hotter than his rage still was. Those lips had snagged his bottom lip, were tugging it, and Draco found himsel reacting unwittingly - Potter's tongue was on his lips and he was opening his mouth, wasn't he, and it was *warm*, fuck, warm in this cold, open tower - the instant their tongues touched, though, Draco came to himself. His fists were still clutching handfuls of Potter's robes, and he used this to shove Potter away from him. "Get off me!" Draco snapped, aware that he was shaking, though not from the rage now, and furious with himself because of it. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Potter looked startled, as though Draco's reaction was unexpected. That alone made Draco's blood practically boil in his veins. "I - er - sorry," he mumbled, squinting at the floor. His cheek was already blooming into crimson/purple swelling. His lips were as red as though they'd been hit, too. "I - "

Potter stopped. He let go of Draco's robes, which he only then seemed to become aware of still holding, turned, and fled the Owlery.

Completely jarred by this turn of events, Draco turned and began pacing. It had been a long time since he had paced in this room, but he still knew its dimensions well. What the hell?! He'd punched Potter for calling him a pouf, and Potter had gone and kissed him. Angrily. No, scratch that. Demandingly. Not hesitantly, the way one would think him likely to. Draco caught himself wondering whether Potter had kissed any other men. Whether he, Draco, had been the first. He had not kissed like a - a *virgin kisser*, Draco thought, coining the term. It had been - more than adequate, in fact.

The speed of his pace increased considerably at this thought. How had he *known*, dammit? Draco demanded silently of the universe. Was it that obvious? And - why on earth, startling thought, had Potter kissed *him*, of all people?

So many questions, and, again, no one to put them to. Draco gave up on any thought or hope of sleeping that night. Heat was still pooled in his groin, and he paced until it had worn off. Gods, was he really *that* desperate? Draco kicked a bit of loose stone in anger - of all things, he did *not* need to have *this* to deal with, as well.

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He was in the library two days later when he heard it. Aimlessly roaming the Restricted Section, just for his own, mindless entertainment, Draco caught the lowered tones of two all-too-familiar voices, perhaps two shelves over. He was still shaken by the Owlery incident of two nights before, to the point where he had actually stayed in his own dormitory since then. No more night time wanderings, especially not there, when there were disturbing Gryffindors on the loose. Determined as he'd been to put the entire event out of his mind, Draco found his thoughts continually wandering back to the kiss itself - nothing else. Just desperation, he told himself firmly. I will not be another Zabini. I am perfectly *fine* by myself.

"… and Dumbledore really believes him?" The female voice was worried-sounding, and Draco scowled. He knew that voice. Granger.

"Yes, I think he must," Potter's own hushed voice returned. "Malfoy says he's joined Dumbledore, and Dumbledore confirmed it when I asked him."

"Why did you ask, Harry?" Granger's voice had an odd sound in it.

Pause. "Just wanted to know for sure," Potter's voice came, sounding the shrug Draco was sure had accompanied the comment.

"When did you see him?"

"Dumbledore? Yesterday."

"Why only then? I thought you talked to Malfoy the day before."

"I did," Potter said vaguely.

Draco realized that he had not moved in several moments. Holding his breath, he continued to listen.

"So? Why wait?"

Now Potter sounded uncomfortable. "Uh, Hermione… something else happened, too."

"With Malfoy? What, Harry?" The damned mudblood, oops, pardon me, muggleborn, sounded excited. Draco scowled.

"I, er, called him a pouf, and he got really mad. That's why he hit me, actually." Potter sounded reluctant, like he was making some huge confession.

"So what did you do?"

An audible shuffle. "Hermione - you can't tell anyone this," Potter said desperately. "Not even Ron."

"Not even Ron? Why - ?"

"Because I kissed him," Potter blurted out.

A quick intake of air. "You kissed him?" Granger repeated, her voice a loud whisper now. "*Malfoy?!*"

"Shh! Keep your voice down!" Potter said agitatedly. "Yes. It was stupid. I know it was. I… I don't know what came over me."

"Harry," Granger said, trying to sound like she was being reasonable, "I know you prefer men, and that's perfectly *fine*. But of all people - "

"I said it was stupid, okay?" Potter sounded irritated now. Draco shifted uncomfortably, praying they wouldn't come any nearer.

"So, what happened next?"

"Nothing," Potter said flatly. "He was horrified, and I left. He probably doesn't even *like* blokes."

"This isn't about that," Granger said. "Even if he did - have you forgotten that it's Malfoy, Harry? You two don't exactly like each other. You never have."

"I know that," Potter said irritably. "I just… I don't know. Like I said, I don't really know what I was thinking."

Granger gave a gentle snort. "Obviously not," she said. There was a short pause. Draco realized that he had not breathed in some time and let his breath out very quietly.

"Harry," Granger began again, sounding practical this time, "do you have a crush on Malfoy?"

"What?" Potter's voice sounded as though the word had been uttered mid-whirl. "No! Of course not! He's - he's *Malfoy*, for crying out loud! As in, Lucius Malfoy's son, who, even if he's not turning out all evil like we thought he would, is still a jerk and still hates me."

Another short pause, while Draco and Granger were evidently both contemplating the obvious flaw in Potter's statement. "You didn't say that you hated him," Granger said quietly.

Something fell on the floor then, with a thunk. Potter's voice was muffled as he stooped to retrieve whatever it was that he'd dropped. "Well, I should have," he said. "I do. I do hate Malfoy. He's a bastard."

Granger, amazingly, stayed quiet.

Draco had had enough. For reasons beyond his comprehension, he felt unexpectedly stung by Potter's last comment. Stupid *bastard*. He slipped around the shelves and quietly made his way out of the library.

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"Malfoy?"

The voice was hesitant. Asking, for once, not presuming. Draco put his Transfiguration textbook down on his lap and considered his response. Eventually, he said, "What?"

"Can I talk to you?"

Draco flicked his wand and his bed curtains parted to reveal Zabini, sitting on the edge of Goyle's bed. Goyle wasn't there. "What do you want?"

"I just wanted to apologize. I seem to be pissing you off a lot lately. Not like that's any different from usual, but - " Zabini twisted his wand nervously in his hands, evidently unsure of what, exactly to say. "I always wanted to be friends with you, but I - "

"Can't stop being a prick for three straight seconds?" Draco filled in, deliberately nasty. He couldn't resist adding, "Or maybe that's not the most applicable of terms for you."

Zabini flushed self-consciously, though whether it was the slur at his sexuality or just the rudeness, Draco couldn't tell. "Maybe not," Zabini said, after a moment. "I wasn't trying to pry, the other day. With your letter, I mean. I know what it's like, though - getting letters from home - about stuff, I mean. The war." He dropped his voice a little, eyes cutting around the otherwise empty dorm.

Draco's gaze flicked up to the other's. Zabini's eyes were hazel in a darkly-tanned face, and rather nice, especially when they weren't narrowed in his former bullying attitude, squinted as they pinned some lowly Hufflepuff to the wall in a corridor. "You get letters about that?" he asked carefully.

"Oh, sure," Zabini said. "My father's always going on about supporting the Dark Lord and making sure I know where my loyalties lie and all that. I guess you get that a lot." His eyes were suddenly rather scrutinizing, and Draco looked away.

"Yeah, I do."

Zabini, apparently not finished with his original point, though, leaned forward. "So, I just wanted to say I'm sorry. That's all."

Draco raised his eyes again, though his shoulders remained as tense as before. Untrusting. "Apology accepted."

"I really wish we were better friends," Zabini said, letting his voice get slightly husky, still leaning forward. His forearms were resting on his knees, the wand dangled loosely in his squared hands.

Draco stiffened. "If this is actually an ill-disguised attempt to seduce me, desist at once."

Zabini laughed. It was low, and definitely sexy. And he was still sitting on Goyle's bed. "Draco, Draco," he said, shaking his head, "always so defensive and prickly. Do you *ever* let anyone in? You don't have to be strong and silent all the time, you know. I could make you - "

"Your whore for a night, yes, I'm well aware of the fact," Draco said coldly. "Unfortunately, however, I prefer not to waste myself on indiscriminate encounters with people who are not only willing to but have, in fact, fucked or been fucked by the entire castle, thank you." He flicked his wand again (he'd never put it down) and the curtains closed again.

Zabini was on his feet in a second, wrenching them apart. "Draco," he said, trying to sound placating, but it came out in a whine. He was attractive, certainly, but the attraction most certainly did *not* lie in his voice. "You don't have to jump all over me. So what if I'm a popular guy? It doesn't have to be so serious, you know. Just a one-off, even - it takes the edge off, you know? Why're you always so defensive?"

That word again. Draco set his jaw. "I cannot believe that you are almost in my bed," he said, through gritted teeth. He raised his wand. "Are you simply incapable of understanding that I don't want you here? That I'm not interested? Get OUT."

Zabini's certainty wavered. "Is there something - "

"Yes, there's 'something'!" Draco shouted, the fury rising up and overtaking him again with his meaning it to. "I *heard* you with Goyle the other night, you creep! I don't know *what* that is, but the least you could do is put Silencing charms up when you're going to bugger my friend senseless in his own bed! Believe it or not, the rest of us do *not* get off on the sound of you doing exactly that! You *creep*," he reiterated, still seething.

"Hey - Goyle and I were just - "

"I don't want to hear it," Draco snapped. "You have three seconds to get out of my sight and then I hex you. One - two - thr - "

Zabini disappeared, yanking the bed curtains back into place. A slam of the door four seconds later proved that he had left the dormitory. Draco cast a Silencing charm around his own bed and silently fought against the sudden urge to cry. At what, he didn't know, exactly. It had been an overwhelming day. He curled up on his side and eventually fell asleep, still fully dressed.

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Chapter: 4

Chapter 4: Owls

There was something just so depressing about breakfast, but Draco couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was. Perhaps it was the fact that, more and more lately, he just sat there, in a little pool of silence, surrounded by his Housemates. They seemed to be carefully avoiding him. After having exploded at Zabini two days earlier, most of his year seemed to be avoiding him. Crabbe and Goyle - especially Goyle - shuffled nervously around him, Pansy had taken up with a sixth-year, and Zabini seemed altogether aloof.

Perhaps it had something to do with the white owl which always flew to the Gryffindor table, while no creature, human or otherwise, generally approached Draco at all these days. None worth mentioning, at any rate. Draco almost found himself wishing he had a friend like Granger - not Granger herself, perish the thought - but someone who would sit down beside him and *make* him talk, force it out of him. Because, apart from a general sort of malaise, Draco himself didn't really know what was so wrong with everything.

A loud guffaw caught his attention then, and he glanced over to see Crabbe covering his mouth foolishly, while Zabini's eyes smouldered at him. Goyle looked slightly nonplussed. Draco caught Zabini's eye and gave the other a scowl so dark it could be classified by the Ministry as a lethal weapon. Zabini swallowed visibly, and turned back to Crabbe, obviously lightening the topic of conversation.

That night, Draco heard him with Nott, as he lay awake. What was *wrong* with the git? Was he some sort of sex addict, or something? Nott cried out as Zabini was obviously being too rough with him. Recalling Crabbe's mixed expression earlier, Draco felt his lip twist - how likely was it really that five of five seventh-year Slytherin males were all queer? Well, Zabini he didn't count - he was *everything*sexual. He probably fucked Mrs. Norris when heads were turned the other way. Disgusted, Draco got up and left the dormitory.

The Owlery was colder in his pyjamas, and Hedwig was not there.

* * *

"Come in." The dry, smooth voice granted entrance, and Draco accepted it. He pushed back the door to the private office behind the Potions laboratory. Snape looked up, eyes half-lidded, half-interested, as always. "Malfoy."

"Good evening, Professor," Draco said stiffly. All too aware that he had dark circles under his eyes from lack of sleep the night before, he felt unsettled. Uneasy. But he'd come here for a reason, and it was a good one.

"What can I do for you?" Snape asked, waving to the plain, wooden chair across from his desk. His quill was still poised in his other hand, hovering over unmarked Potions essays.

Draco took the seat, awkwardly. He would have preferred to stand, but there wasn't really a choice. In his earlier years, he had idolized the man, until his father had coolly explained the fact that Snape had been a traitor to the Dark Lord and not to get too close. "He is nothing but dangerous for you, son," Lucius had said - the last word coming out every bit as much of an implied sneer as it always had. Draco had read between the lines: "If you disobey, you are *not* my son."

He realized that he was fiddling with his wand in his pocket, and also that Snape was still waiting for him. "Sir," he said. "It's about Zabini."

Snape was patient - a quality he generally hid around non-Slytherins. "What about him?"

Draco bit the inside of his cheek, wondering how to word this, exactly. "Uh - it's just that - well, he's something of a seducer, sir. He's been with probably over half the students over fourth year

now, probably some under as well. I - "

He stopped. Snape cleared his throat and laid down his quill. "Yes? Go on, please."

"I think he's at least propositioned everyone in our dorm by now, and - uh - been successful with most, as well. Not me," he added quickly, looking up, lest Snape should mistake him. "But - others."

"In your dorm," Snape repeated, surprise lacing the baritone. "Males as well as females, then?"

"Definitely," Draco said. "Probably more of the first, actually."

Another throat-clearing, subtly done. "I see," Snape said. "So, in your opinion, these are - consensual deeds?"

"Yes, but - "

"But you feel that the other parties are being taken advantage of," Snape filled in. Draco nodded. "Yes," he said. "I can see that. You have - been approached, as well?"

Draco looked up again, a quick glance. "Yes, sir. Several times. This year and last."

Snape looked carefully away, steepling long fingers in front of his face. "Ah. You need not tell me whether or not you - "

"I haven't."

"I was not going to ask."

"I know, sir."

Their eyes met for a moment. Snape was quiet, and Draco did not flinch before the other's

intense gaze. Finally, Snape dropped his eyes. "Very well," he said. "I will… speak to Zabini."

"Thanks," Draco said tightly.

Another pause, not quite a hesitation. Snape picked up his quill again, and said, not looking at Draco, "Professor Dumbledore spoke to me."

An unpleasant sensation moved through Draco's spine. Uneasy anticipation. "Ah."

A quick flicker of dark eyes before they returned to the essay beneath their scrutiny. "I understand you have sworn him your loyalty."

It was getting harder to breathe. "I did."

Snape's fingertips whitened around the quill. "You are aware of what oath-breaking means, in the wizarding community."

There it was again. Suspicion, colder than ice. "I am," Draco said, his voice matching it for coldness. Time to turn the tables. "I'm also aware that you were a traitor."

That got him Snape's full attention again. The eyes snapped up and narrowed. Then, with a visible effort, Snape spoke again. "I am sure that you are. Very well - allow me to speak freely, then. You break that oath and you will have more than the law to answer to. Do I make myself clear?"

Draco was enraged. "And why, precisely," he hissed, feeling his colour rise, "would I break my oath? To whom would I break, do you presume?"

Snape just made an impatient gesture. "Foolish question," he said. "You know that I must keep my suspicions. I suspect everyone, the obvious not least of all. You know that by nature of who you are - whose *son* you are - that you will regarded with distrust until you have earned the right to be trusted."

Draco went very still. "I doubt very much that my father will consider me his son when he finds

out," he said, after a bit.

"That does not matter. You must know that you are going to get this from everyone. On both sides, Malfoy. You know that." Snape's regard was patient again, and calmer.

"Of course I do," Draco said, though the full meaning of it had not yet actually sunk in. But yes, somewhere in there, he *had* known. Witness Potter. Bloody, fucking, self-righteous *bastard*. "I just wasn't expecting it from you, too," he said.

Snape's expression did not falter or change. "Dumbledore… saved my life," he said, his tone devoid of emotion. "It was the least I could do to repay him with my loyalty. You would do well to do the same."

The words were unplanned, but Draco realized that he meant them once they were spoken. "I intend to."

The corner of Snape's mouth quirked; not enough and too quick to be considered a smile. But some of the heaviness left his demeanor. "Good. Was there anything else?"

Draco stood. "No, sir. Thank you."

Snape nodded. "Good night."

Draco pulled the door to behind him.

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Snape said nothing more to Draco over the next few days, but Draco noticed that Zabini was serving detention after detention in the Potions classroom. Good. The nature of Draco's interactions with Goyle and Crabbe were not at a level where he could confront either about Zabini, and he didn't really want to - but it wasn't right, that Zabini should just have the power to use people, anyone he wanted, for whatever he wanted, like that. Perhaps it had something to do with his father, Draco thought suddenly, from his lofty perch in the Owlery one night. He didn't want to be his father's tool any more than Zabini's.

Draco sighed audibly, ruffling Hedwig's feathers. She gave a soft hoot, and he looked down at her. "Sorry," he said, astonished to hear his voice sound genuinely apologetic. His eyes strayed to the door, and he wondered if Potter was going to be up here again tonight. If he would try to kiss him again - no, strike that thought. Though the entire incident was still rather puzzling, it had almost fit with the moment. Almost - the exchange had been heated throughout; Draco's blow no less than Potter's kiss, and no more. Draco had actually bruised his knuckles on Potter's strong jaw, felt their tender stiffness every time he'd moved his right hand over the next few days, reminding him. He was still cursing himself for not having pushed away sooner. Preferably *before* Potter's tongue had gotten inside his mouth. It was a moment of weakness, certainly. *He took me by surprise*, Draco's inner voice protested. *How could I have known he was going to do that?* Draco sighed again.

Hedwig hooted again, and stuck her leg out at him. Confused for a moment, Draco just stared at her. "What are you - ? Oh, I get it. You think it would help if I owled somebody. Well, it's not going to help, so you can just put that leg down. Thanks anyway."

She merely stared at him amberly, then hooted again, more insistently, and switched legs, holding the other one out. Draco smiled. "Not even if I posted it tied to *that* leg," he said. "There's no one to write to, Hedwig. It's no use in trying to convince me." He stroked her soft head and she closed her eyes. Draco let his head fall back against the stone. *No one there at all.*

His mind replayed the conversation between Potter and Granger in the Restricted Section for about the hundredth time since he'd heard it. *"I do. I do hate Malfoy."* Then why had the git kissed him? It was only one of the many questions running around in Draco's head these days, but it was occupying rather more than its fair share of space at the moment. Although, if the complaint was that Potter's behaviour was inconsistent, then the Gryffindor had evidently made up his mind to go with the hate - he'd ignored Draco completely every time they'd been in the same vicinity ever since the kissing incident. He supposed that, had their positions been reversed, he would have been ignoring the person who had shoved him away, too, but still. Draco couldn't identify the reason why Potter's entire existence bothered him so very much. But it did.

* * *

Two weeks passed. Nothing significant changed, except that Draco was no longer woken by anything. If Zabini was still on the prowl, he was using Silencing charms. One day after class, Snape called him aside. Draco hoisted his bag onto his shoulder and followed Snape to his desk, where the other waited until the classroom was fully empty. He then locked the door. "Has Dumbledore spoken to you?" he asked abruptly.

Draco shook his head. "No. Should he have?"

"Yes. He has devised a training plan for the - do you know about his Order?" Snape looked suddenly worried.

"I know about it, yes. He said that I'm not in it, though. I'm just bound to his service." Draco hated the words, but forced himself to say them.

"Well, you are going to be included in this," Snape said shortly. "I think he is avoiding the term 'boot camp', but that is essentially what it is going to be. Training, immediately following graduation in a month." His eyes were on Draco, gauging for his reaction.

Draco swallowed. "Alright," he said.

"Any questions?"

Where to start. "Who will all be there? I mean, will there be other students there?" Draco asked.

Snape eyed him before answering. "Yes," he said finally. "A few - well, several, I suppose. Mostly Gryffindors, naturally."

Naturally. Draco bit back the bitter response before it embarrassed him. "Who? Sir," he added.

Snape shuffled a stack of parchments. "Potter, naturally, and all of his hangers-on. A number from the former so-called Defense Association. I trust you remember who they were?"

Draco nodded. "Yes."

The eyes cut up, sharp as razors. "You really may want to reconsider your hostility toward Potter," Snape said, not exactly chastising, and not exactly *not*. "You are on the same side now. You may have to defend him one day."

"I'm not hostile!" Draco said loudly. "I haven't been hostile to Potter in weeks!"

An eye roll. "What stamina," Snape said. "Truly impressive. See if you can manage it for the remainder of the term, won't you? All of this - school, dorms, Houses, Quidditch teams - all of that is a mere game. The real thing is about to begin, and you need to be ready for it. Are you?"

Though his jaw clenched, Draco could hear the sense in this. He nodded again. "Yes," he said stiffly. "I hope you don't think, *sir*, that I wasn't taking it seriously when I made my decision. About not becoming a Death Eater."

Snape inclined his head, every bit as stiffly. "A valid point," he conceded. "I am not trying to tell you that you and Potter need become friends. Just that you must be able to work together. You *will* be working together, whether you want to or not. Dumbledore is basing this program on the Ministry's Auror training program, and Kingsley Shacklebolt will be overseeing the camp. Some of you have been selected for particular training, including you and Potter both. Combat." Snape stopped, watching for his reaction closely.

Combat. The word echoed in Draco's mind. He found himself nodding again. "Okay," he said. Neutrally. Good. "What are the others being trained in?"

"A variety of skills," Snape said. "I cannot recall all of them at the moment. You will find out soon enough. Potter is also, naturally, getting more training than the rest of you will be. Practical defense, mostly. His Occlumency training has been completed already."

Potter had taken Occlumency? This was news. Draco filed it away under his private list of things which made Potter disturbingly dangerous at times. "When is Dumbledore going to tell us all this?"

"That, I do not know. Soon, I hope." Snape's eyes leveled on him again. Draco met them evenly. "Malfoy. This training is not optional."

"I understand that, sir." Draco kept his tone polite. *I resent not having the choice, but it's fine. I really have nothing better to do, anyway. And perhaps I'll be able to defend myself when Father sends the dogs after my blood.*

"Very well. You may go."

* * *

Draco,

In light of my last letter, which I notice went unanswered, I have decided that you will visit the Manor this weekend. Today is Tuesday. You have until Thursday to obtain permission from Dumbledore or whomever the correct authorities may be. Your presence is required at the house this weekend, and I trust that you will make this an immediate priority. You have until Thursday at six o'clock in the evening to reply.

Lucius Octavian Circinus Alastair Carrey-Ridgeworth Malfoy III

The parchment was crumpled in his left fist, which hung dangerously out of the Owlery window.

* * *

Shortly before dawn, Draco composed himself sufficiently to write two letters, of equal brevity.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

The enclosed is a letter from my father which arrived this morning. I require your advice, fairly immediately. Thank you very much,

Draco Malfoy

Potter,

If you have a free hour in your busy night schedule tonight, perhaps you could spare me it. I need to talk to someone, and your owl keeps trying to make me write you, so blame this on her.

Draco Malfoy

Draco surveyed the second critically, read over four more times, then rolled it and affixed it to Hedwig's leg. "You don't mind, do you?" he asked her, as though expecting a response. She hooted and pulled the short letter in, then hopped around to present her other leg, from Dumbledore's letter. "That one's going to Dumbledore," Draco told her. "And the other one is… for your master, okay? I don't know why I'm doing this. I must be crazy, or desperate. Maybe both. Maybe if I'm nicer to him, he'll talk to me. I don't know why I need to talk to anybody at all, but I guess the truth is, I'm worried about stuff. I don't know what's going to happen. I hope that Dumbledore really can protect me. He doesn't know my father the way I do."

Hedwig blinked and hooted again. Draco sighed. "I can't believe I've taken to talking to owls," he muttered. Hedwig nipped his finger then, and he winced. "Ouch! Sorry! I just want someone who can talk back - if Potter can manage to be - I don't know - not *weird* for three seconds, then maybe it'll be okay."

A softer nuzzle with the beak this time, and Hedwig spread her wings and took off. Draco looked after her through the open window. Clouds were rolling over the rising sun, and it looked as though a storm was approaching.

* * *

Draco skipped his afternoon classes (he wasn't missing much in Care of Magical Creatures, anyway, and he didn't want to see Potter before that night - assuming the git came). He needed a nap. He realized, as well, that he hadn't specified a meeting time. Potter hadn't responded at all, not even a telling-off for using his own owl to owl him. Draco cast a *tempus* spell to check the time. It was past midnight. One o'clock came and went. Draco got up and paced. Two o'clock arrived, and no Potter. At half-three, there were footsteps on the stairs. Draco hurried back to the window sill and scrambled to regain his seat before the Gryffindor arrived.

He lost his balance just as the door opened.

"Malf - fuck!" Potter exclaimed. He was across the tower room in about three seconds, and his strong hands were on Draco's arm and knee, hauling him back onto the ledge.

Draco's hands, which had scrabbled wildly for a moment, closing on only air, somehow landed in Potter's hair and on his shoulder now. His heart beating wildly, he clutched at Potter for an embarrassingly long moment until he was sure he wasn't going to fall.

"What the fuck are you *doing*?!" Potter demanded. He was still holding on, as though worried that Draco was going to launch himself, physically, from the window sill again. His hands radiated warmth through the backs of Draco's arms.

"Nothing," he said, thoroughly infuriated with himself for having done such a foolish thing in the first place. "You can let go now."

Potter's own face warmed and he stepped away, releasing Draco, whose arms felt immediately colder. "Seriously, though, Malfoy - what was that?"

"I just lost my balance!" Draco snapped. "It's nothing!"

"Nothing!" Potter exclaimed. "If I hadn't arrived just now, you'd be dead!"

"It was you who startled me in the first place," Draco shot back, still furious with himself.

Potter took a deep breath. "Well then, I'm sorry," he said. He found a bit of empty bench and sat down on it. "Come sit over here. I don't like seeing you up there. I'm afraid I'll startle you again, or something."

Draco slid reluctantly down and sat at the other end of the narrow, wooden bench. A silence fell, not quite comfortable, but Draco couldn't bring himself to break it. He was watching Potter's hands, tracing patterns in the grain of the wood. Finally, the Gryffindor looked up.

"So," he said. "What's up? Why did you want to meet me?"

All of a sudden, this seemed like a really *bad* idea. But it was too late to back out now. Potter was there, had received an owl from Draco saying that he wanted to meet him. And he'd come. Draco shifted. "I just wanted to - well - talk about something," he said, twisting a bit of robe between his fingers. "I don't really have anyone that I talk about stuff with, and somehow I thought maybe - " he stopped abruptly, realizing how incredibly inane and stupid he sounded.

Potter seemed unfazed by this, if surprised. "It's okay, Malfoy," he said, sounding more comfortable than he had before. "It's fine. Really. Go on."

Draco drew a shaky breath and glanced up at the Gryffindor. "Okay, then," he said, still sounding more uncertain than he wanted to. "Well - my father owled me on Tuesday, and said that I have to come to the Manor this weekend." *That my presence is required.* "I asked Dumbledore what to do, and he said not to answer it, so I didn't. I'm not going, obviously," Draco added, at the look on Potter's face. "I swore an oath. I'm on this side now, whether I wanted to be or not."

Potter nodded slowly. "Are you worried?" he asked, very directly. The moonlight glanced against his eyes, distorting their colour, but they were very clear and deep. He was also, apparently, taking Draco at his word that he wanted to talk, and was responding unquestioningly.

Draco nodded. "A bit, yes. My father can be - well, I'm sure you know. Brutal," he said flatly.

Potter nodded carefully, as though unsure whether this was the correct response. "You're afraid of him," he said. It was not a question.

"I - " Draco started to protest, then, "Yes. I suppose I am."

Potter leaned in. "There's something I don't get, Malfoy. You just blow over hot and cold all the time - first you're a bastard for most of seven years, then you get all quiet and withdraw from everything, and now you're suddenly wanting to talk to me. Explain."

The temper flared again. "I don't have to explain myself to you," Draco said tersely.

"Isn't that what you invited me here to do?" Potter returned.

Touche. "Look," Draco said firmly. "I just wanted to tell you about the thing with my father, because you're the only person, besides Dumbledore and Snape, who knows that I'm on this side, and I had to talk to someone about it. I don't really know Snape very well, and I'm not going to Dumbledore. He's done enough for me. I know you hate me, but I thought maybe it was time to put our past behind us. If we're going to this boot camp and all, in July."

Potter's face flickered with several expressions, finally settling on vague horror. "Oh, right, we are, aren't we? That's going to be such a bad time. Oh, well. Better trained than not-trained, I guess."

Draco paused. "True," he said. "So. Truce?"

Potter studied him for a moment, then held out his hand. "Truce. And I don't hate you."

"You've been - never mind." Draco cut the statement short.

"Avoiding you?" Potter filled in quietly.

"You have been."

"Look," Potter said, sounding agitated, "I don't know what happened last time we were both here, and I don't really like thinking about it. I don't know what came over me, but I'm sorry. I've been - uh - feeling rather awkward about the whole thing."

"So," Draco said, letting a note of triumph creep into his voice, "it turns out that you're the pouf of the two of us, after all."

Potter bit his lip. It was really rather endearing. "Yeah, I guess I am," he said, sighing.

Oh, to be proper enemies again! The mileage potential! Draco restrained his tongue. "I never knew, Potter."

"Obviously," Potter said dryly. "Hence the horrified expression and the - never mind. I don't want to talk about it." He shifted on the bench himself, then firmly changed the subject, steering

it back to the topic at hand. "The weekend's only two days away," Potter said. "It's Thursday. Or somewhere between Thursday and Friday, I guess. I never really count it as being the next day until I've slept, you know?"

"What if you don't sleep?" Draco asked.

"Then, it's tomorrow once it gets light out," Potter clarified. "But anyway, back to this. What will your father do when he realizes that you're not going to write back?"

"He'll have realized by now," Draco said sharply. "I was supposed to have written back by six tonight. That's one of the reasons why I didn't want to be alone tonight. Just in case."

"Of course," Potter said, nodding and frowning at once. "What were the other reasons?"

"Well, another was - " Draco drew a deep breath, then promptly forgot what he'd been about to say. He found himself staring at Potter's mouth. Thinking about that damnable kiss again. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. He was not *still* staring at it, was he? Surely Potter had noticed by now. Shit, he *was*.

"What?" Potter asked quietly. And then, before Draco could say or do anything, the Gryffindor had gotten up and shortened the distance between them to only a few inches. And then he kissed Draco again.

This time, Draco kissed back. He didn't mean to - he didn't *want* to, but there he was, doing it. His mouth was opening under Potter's warm mouth, warmer than his hands, fuck, which were on Draco's shoulders now, gripping. His lips were sucking Draco's lower lip, and Draco found that his tongue was on Potter's upper lip. They slid together, the two tongues, like two hands closing in around the Snitch at once, and their mouths were joined completely now. It was a dizzying kiss, and Draco felt himself reeling from it. Potter did not seem remotely inclined to stop it, either, but eventually, the need for oxygen took precedence.

With Potter's face not three inches from his own, Draco said, quietly but very distinctly, "Fuck."

"What?" Potter's eyes were searching his face intently. "Please don't tell me that you don't - that you're not - "

"Guess I am now," Draco said shakily, by way of a bad joke, only Potter didn't realize it. Potter *hadn't* known - had only been guessing all along. But it had a bad effect on the Gryffindor, who got quickly to his feet.

"Gods, I'm sorry, Malfoy," Potter mumbled, face deeply crimson. "You wanted to talk to me, and instead I just - I'm so sorry. I am such an idiot. Look, I'll just - " he was backing toward the door now, almost in a blind panic. "I'll just go then." He turned and literally ran out of the room.

Leaving Draco alone and painfully so - and not to mention, painfully aroused. That kiss had been mind-blowing. Who knew that Potter could kiss so well? It was annoying as it was compelling. And why had he responded again, damn him? Draco sagged against the cold stone wall behind him in despair. He was truly hopeless. Shit. This was going to be fucking awkward. Potter was going to be all in a snit again, and Draco wasn't much better off - not having any idea what had just transpired, on either side.

He reached into his trousers and began to wank fiercely, using one hand to jerk along the shaft of his cock and the other to caress his balls. He knew he was thinking about Potter and almost didn't care - he just needed - oh, sweet Merlin, yes, *this*, fuck, this feeling, this release. Potter. Harry Potter. Draco's lips formed the name silently, then aloud as he came in hot spatters on the floor. As he covered his breath, panting limply against the wall, it came to him that perhaps he and Potter - no. Terrible thought. It would never work. Potter was high-strung and reactive and - in short, too much like *him*. *He's also really hot.*

Draco shoved all of his tangled thoughts away, got up and went to bed.

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Chapter: 5

Chapter 5: Blaise Zabini

The more he thought about it, the angrier Draco realized he was about the entire incident. Three days had passed since that last, disastrous kiss in the Owlery. He'd only seen Potter in class, and the other had ignored him entirely. The first time, he'd blushed furiously and kept his face down - that was in Potions. Draco routinely skipped Care of Magical Creatures these days anyway, so no

worries there. One day, there hadn't been a Potions class and he'd been relieved. Otherwise, the chance encounters were few, and usually helped by the presence of large crowds separating them, anyway.

And Draco had avoided the Owlery. Just in case.

Damn it, he was *furious* with Potter. What kind of a person behaved that way? Surely, despite his inflated head and Gryffindor self-righteousness, Potter could see that Draco was in a bad place. And if he had actually lowered his pride enough to *ask* Potter to come and meet him - after the prat had constantly tried to force Draco to talk to him in previous chance encounters - then he'd had the gall to kiss Draco again, and then to *leave*. It was insulting, thoughtless, selfish, and just plain rude. Draco was incensed.

Every time he saw Potter, his jaw clenched and his hands balled into fists. He had no idea how he was supposed to read the other, either. Never mind Draco being pissed off that Potter had ditched him there, when Draco had specifically said that he didn't want to be alone, lest his father react that quickly. It turned out to have been needless worry, as he still hadn't heard a thing, but still - it was the principle. Was Potter that naïve, that he didn't realize that Draco was serious about his father? Or was he just that caught up in himself and his own, obvious awkwardness?

Whenever Draco got to this question, he inevitably jumped up and started pacing. What was going on with Potter? He'd now been kissed *twice* by the git, and both times, said git had freaked out on him and run away, quite literally, immediately after. And wouldn't talk about it. And they both knew that it was not… an impossibility. Except that it was. Potter was Potter. In other words, a dysfunctional, near-sighted twat whose only talents seemed to be dumb luck and oh, yes, mustn't forget, Quidditch. Bastard. Basic friendship wasn't even an option, evidently. Potter would freak himself out at the very notion.

But what do I want?

Hence the pacing. Though Draco would rather have died than have anyone know, he daydreamed about Potter's two kisses almost incessantly. They had both been rather incredible, despite Draco's half-hearted participation in both. Well, perhaps not so much the second, but he'd still been hesitating. And instead of just asking or something, Potter had disappeared. Draco felt he'd been made a fool of; he had no idea how Potter thought of him or what he thought that Draco was thinking about it all. A voice in Draco's head pointed out, quite reasonably, that they should really talk. But he didn't feel quite up to that. He didn't *know* what he wanted, so how could he tell Potter about it? And besides, he added in response to the voice in his head, rather viciously, *look what happened the last time I tried to get Potter to talk to me.*

Maybe Potter was the type who had to have everything done on his terms. Talk when *he* felt like talking; kiss whenever he took the notion into his stubborn, un-styled head. No regard for what Draco might be thinking. Or wanting.

Despite all of this, Draco had the uneasy suspicion that he really wanted Potter. Physically, at least, if in no other way. The entire concept of entertaining any sort of idea of a relationship with Potter - even just a friendly acquaintance - was laughable and met with nothing but scorn in Draco's thinking. Scorn, and perhaps just a tiny corner of wistfulness. He tried not to think about that.

* * *

"You think I have a problem, don't you?"

The nasal voice cut through Draco's concentration, and he looked up in annoyance. With a slight twist of trepidation. "Pardon me?" he asked coolly.

Zabini was standing there, hands on his slender hips, glowering down at him. Only, he didn't look so much angry as petulant. His bottom lip was caught between his teeth in a way that was more attractive than intimidating. "I said, you think I have a problem. Don't you."

Draco set down his textbook, but left it open - hoping, rather in vain, he knew, that Zabini would take it as a hint that he was not welcome to stay long. "Yes, I would say so," he said, keeping his voice cool. "You're a predator. Not to mention, a nympho."

"Fuck you! I am not! It's you who's gotten me all those detentions, isn't it?" Zabini demanded. "You talked to Snape, didn't you?"

Draco shrugged carelessly. "What if I did? You can't just come on to people like that all the time. I told you I was sick of it, and you wouldn't listen. What is your fucking problem?"

Zabini stood a step closer, threateningly. "I'll tell you my problem, you little fuckwit," he hissed, hazel eyes narrowed. His fists were clenched, and Draco glanced at them apprehensively. "I've wanted you since fourth year, you stupid, arrogant, little twit! But would you have me? Oh, no -

not *Malfoy*, he's too good for the likes of the rest of us - he won't even admit he's into men in the first place, never mind - "

"Shut up," Draco cut in, equally angry now. "If you're trying to blame this whole thing with you fucking half the school on me, you're way off base. Secondly, I don't have a problem with admitting that I'm queer. It just depends on who I'm talking to and the context. Thirdly, fucking my own friends in my hearing is *not* the way to go about getting into my good graces. That's one of the things I've always liked least about you - you're promiscuous, and you take advantage of people."

Zabini stopped, wavering. "People are usually glad, when I offer," he said.

"I'm not questioning your… talents," Draco said, deliberately letting his eyes wander south on Zabini's admittedly rather-nice body. "All I'm saying is that I despise the way you use them."

The eyes narrowed again. "And you're saying there ever *was* a way of getting into your good graces?" Zabini asked. "Because I never saw it, if that's the case. You never gave me a chance."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Please don't get all melodramatic. It really only works for Hufflepuffs, and even then it's still annoying. And I think you're mistaking getting into my good graces with getting into my pants."

Zabini grinned suddenly. "Bed, actually," he said.

The half-witted humour caught Draco off-guard, and he smiled, too, reluctantly. "The point," he said, "is - "

"Okay, I get it," Zabini said. "So, you're saying that if I'd just stayed nice and kept it in my pants, you'd have seriously considered going out with me." He delivered this like it was a challenge.

Draco raised the text again, balancing it on one his knees. He rather wished the common room was not empty. "No," he said, letting his voice frost over again. "I'm not saying anything of the sort."

Zabini flared up again. "Then what - oh, you FUCKER!"

A hand clamped down over the Herbology text and shoved it heedlessly to the floor, and suddenly Zabini was looming over Draco. There was no mistaking the look in his eyes - a combination of fury and lust. Things were about to get really nasty.

Or really interesting. Draco was not a Slytherin for nothing. Within a flash, a mere split second, Zabini was on his back on the floor with Draco over him, the blond's thumbs digging into the softer flesh just below Zabini's collarbones. "Don't even think about it," Draco said softly, his voice dangerous.

Zabini just stared up into his eyes, seemingly transfixed. "I can't think about anything else," he said, slightly breathless.

Draco stared back for a second, then flung both his sense and his caution to the wind. Zabini wanted him. No one else did. What would it matter if he gave in, just this once? Sure, Zabini was annoying as hell - but he was also really hot. Like Potter, in that sense. Annoying, definitely qualifying under "can't-ever-be-with", and far too attractive for his - or Draco's - own good. Draco shoved his hips down against Zabini's. "Is this what you want?" he growled.

Oh, it most certainly was. Draco's erection knocked against Zabini's there, and desire coursed through his veins as suddenly as a shot of Firewhiskey. Zabini bit his lip and nodded. "Yes," he croaked.

Draco whipped out his wand and locked the portrait hole. "I'm not going to kiss you, you dirty whore," he hissed. "I don't know where that mouth's been. You want this, you get to work."

Damn, but that was fun. More fun still was Zabini's response, anxious to comply, hips canting upward even as his hand fumbled between them to unzip Draco's trousers, find his bare flesh. They didn't speak, though there was the occasional moan. Draco's own hand snaked into Zabini's trousers with equal speed, and began to jerk the other off even as Zabini's warm hand closed around his cock. Fuck, it felt good to have someone *else* touch it for once, and yes, damn him, Zabini was indeed talented. Draco had a new idea, though, even in his lust-fogged haze of thoughts. He worked faster, adding a twist, a bit of pressure here and there, and brought Zabini off. He groaned and came into Draco's hand, and Draco lost no time. He shifted suddenly, pinning Zabini, who was gasping, hand temporarily motionless on Draco's cock, to sit on Zabini's chest. Draco grabbed Zabini by his hair and yanked his head up. "Suck," he commanded, positioning his cock in front of Zabini's mouth.

Zabini nodded once, quickly, then closed his lips around Draco. It was bliss. Pure, fucking bliss. Draco had chosen this position so that he was totally in control, so that Zabini couldn't move, couldn't get away, until Draco let him up, and he was glad that it was this way. Zabini wasn't trying to get away, though - he was sucking as though his very life depended on it. And it was so good. Draco closed his eyes, although the sight of Zabini's mouth around his cock was more arousing than anything, and thrust his hips forward, roughly. He wanted to *hurt* Zabini, damn him, for what he'd done to Goyle. And Nott. And whomever else. For even daring proposition him in the first place. A Malfoy! Such presumption. Draco's cock hit the softness of the back of Zabini's throat, and it was hot - fuck - his balls tightened and he could feel it coming - there - he was spattering the back of Zabini's throat with come and opened his eyes, silently commanding the other to swallow. He did, obediently. When it was over, Draco got up and zipped up his trousers.

"Stay away from me," he said, and stalked out of the dorm with his schoolbag.

Zabini stayed where he was, on the floor.

* * *

Oh, how he hated Monday mornings. And Monday morning breakfast above all other things. Draco scowled into his coffee. A flash of white caught his eye, though. Hedwig. Flying toward him. That was odd. She fluttered down onto the table, neatly sidestepping the coffee mug cradled in Draco's cold hands. Curiously glances went up and down the table, though, Draco presumed, not necessarily connecting it with Potter. It could have been any snowy owl, coming from outside the school. But Draco knew it was Hedwig.

"Aren't you at the wrong table?" he asked her idly, but she hooted and stuck her leg out at him. "What? This is for me?" Another hoot, and a shake of the leg. "Thanks," Draco said, much surprised, and pulled the short scroll from the proffered leg. Hedwig looked about hopefully, as if looking to be fed.

"I don't have anything for you," Draco told her firmly. "I'm not a breakfast person. Go find Potter; he'll give you some bacon or something."

Another hoot, slightly offended-sounding, and she flew away quickly, clipping his head with one of her wings. Draco looked down the table. Zabini was very pointedly not looking at him, in a sulky silence, and Crabbe and Goyle were both staring at the scroll in eager anticipation. Draco

rose. "I'll see you guys in class," he said quietly. He didn't look at the Gryffindor table on his way out. Just in case Potter had a fit about Hedwig making deliveries for Draco now, or something like that.

In the Entrance Hall, he pulled the seal off and unrolled the letter. Oh. It was from Potter. That explained much.

Dear Draco,

I just wanted to say that I'm sorry about the other night. I behaved very badly. I talked about it all with Hermione, and she reckons that I shouldn't have kissed you again, or that I shouldn't have left when you wanted to talk. So, I'm sorry. If you want, I'll make it up to you, if I can. Do you want to meet sometime this week? Let me know through Hedwig, if you want.

Harry Potter.

After reading this through three times, Draco rolled the short scroll up again and put it into his pocket. He didn't know what to think. One part of him felt jubilant - it wasn't too late. But slowly, the anger took over again. Stupid *git*. What, he just thought that a simple - very simple - apology note could fix everything? It couldn't! And he absolutely hated the fact that Granger, of all people, had to know about the fact that they had kissed. Even if it hadn't been his idea. He wondered how Potter had worded *that* story to Granger - "Well, he *did* kiss back, Hermione, even if I took him by surprise, so…" The horror.

No. Draco made up his mind as he stood there, dithering in the Entrance Hall. He put the note into the pocket of his robes, and went to Defence Against the Dark Arts. It didn't deserve a response.

* * *

The next few weeks passed similarly. Potter never said anything about Draco's lack of response, and they were seeing each other less and less now, anyway. Not that *that* happy state could last,

though. Dumbledore had sent owls, and Draco was now the possessor of most of the information he could have asked for with regards to the training camp in summer. Boot camp, Snape was still calling it. He seemed to have taken it upon himself to "check in" with Draco every so often nowadays; Draco rather suspected that Dumbledore had put him up to it. They would have tea and talk about the Potions NEWT and occasionally other things.

Like Lucius. They both called him that now. Lucius had not responded to Draco's lack of response, and that was not a reassuring fact. Draco privately wondered whether his father was planning some sort of huge, drastic punishment for his disobedience, or whether he'd make the obvious assumption, that his son had defected from the Cause, and was having Voldemort work in Draco's prolonged and painful death into the battle plans, or whether he just didn't even matter enough to Lucius to warrant a response at all.

None of these thoughts were particularly happy ones.

As for the Owlery, Draco had abandoned it. It was too cold, anyway, and filled with owl droppings and bits of straw. Only, no one else ever went there. The older towers were all closed; the Astronomy Tower was practically a revolving door of snogging couples, and most of the castles other dark corners had lurkers themselves. Draco had taken to wandering. Sometimes, he stopped by the Owlery and, if she was there and not out hunting, Hedwig would join him for the wander, perching on his shoulder. He always returned her after, even though he knew she was perfectly capable of flying back up to the tower herself.

Sometime in April, things took a slight turn for the better. Draco walked back into the dorm one Saturday afternoon, windblown and, for once, satisfied with life. He'd just come back from Quidditch practice, and it had gone well. Zabini was sitting on his own bed, and looked up when Draco came in. "Hello," he said.

That was new. Ever since the blow job incident last month, Zabini had been sulking and avoiding him, not even acknowledging Draco's presence when he was in a room. Draco dropped his Firebolt - again grateful that Lucius had given in and let him buy it the previous summer, before all of this. "Hello," he returned, an edge of caution in his voice.

Zabini swung his legs down from the bed, sitting up. He had not been reading, just lying there, curtains open. Waiting? "Good practice?" he asked quietly.

"What are you doing, Zabini?" Draco pulled his gloves off and flung them down, too.

The hazel eyes turned soulful. "I wish you would call me Blaise."

Draco rolled his eyes and sighed heavily. "Fine. Blaise. What?"

Zabini got up and walked over, slowly, stopping at the far side of Draco's bed, by one of the post. He leaned against it, wrapping one arm around it. He seemed to be choosing his words with care, and Draco waited, observing him - as two predators observe one another, circling. Only Draco was the more dangerous of them now; he'd established that last time they'd had words. Zabini ran his tongue over his bottom lip in what appeared to be more of a nervous gesture than a seductive one. But. Draco's cock's twitched subtly, remembering that tongue and what it was capable of. "Would you fuck me?" Zabini asked, his voice almost too low to hear.

Draco stopped his own movements. "Pardon me?" The boot he'd been about to unfasten was forgotten.

"I really want you to," Zabini said quietly. "I'd bottom for you, Draco. I just - I want it so badly - I - " He stopped talking himself, staring at Draco with a plea burning in his eyes.

"Haven't you forgotten this yet?" Draco asked idly, stalling for deciding time. Zabini was really far too attractive. And he was getting rather… harder to resist, with each passing second. Draco was hard.

Zabini moved around the post, came to the post closer to Draco. With one finger, he reached out and touched the center of Draco's chest, running it downward slightly. When he spoke, he spoke to the place he was touching. "I don't think any sane, gay man could look at you once and forget you," he murmured. His voice was husky now, not nasal.

Draco shivered despite himself. "And you want to bottom," he said, still playing for time. If it weren't for the fact that his adrenaline was still pumping through his veins, perhaps he would have said no right away. But the longer he postponed saying it, the further away the possibility of his ever saying it got.

Zabini nodded, then glanced hesitantly up at his face. "I would do anything you wanted me to," he said, still quiet.

Draco knew his question was a bit brutal, but did not hesitate in asking it. "Who have you all been with since - "

"No one," Zabini cut in quietly. "Not a soul, Draco. I - can't - I only want you."

Draco considered for one more second, then deliberately placed his hand over Zabini's, which was still dragging a finger loosely over his torso, and moved it downward. "Don't say a word," Draco said softly, his voice dangerous and seductive. "Just… do as I tell you."

Zabini nodded quickly, his lips slightly parted. His fingers squeezed around Draco's hardness, and Draco found Zabini's with his own hand. "Were you waiting for me?" Draco asked gently.

Another nod.

"Have you dreamed about this?" Draco whispered. His mouth was on Zabini's while the other was still nodding. He kissed well, competently, with enough pressure, but it was somehow nothing like Potter's - and no, he was *not* going to think about that right now. Not now. "If you tell anyone, I will Obliviate you, that's a promise," Draco said, his voice just above a whisper now, lips hovering over Zabini's. Another frantic nod, to show he understood.

Draco withdrew his wand and locked the door several times over. Then he took Zabini over to the other's bed. "Strip," he commanded. Zabini shed his clothes quickly, as Draco stepped out of his own. "Lie down on your face," he said softly, his eyes cool despite the heat in his groin. He pulled the curtains closed, Silencing them as he went.

Again, Zabini obeyed. Draco's cock stood straight out in front of him. Zabini had positioned himself, knees drawn up under his chest, face turned to the side on his own pillow. He reached under the pillow and pulled out a small bottle, which he held awkwardly out to Draco, backwards.

Draco took it from him, and as his fingers closed around the bottle, he froze. Lube. He looked from the bottle to Zabini's arse, just waiting for him. Longing for him, even. "I can't do this," he muttered.

Alarmed, Zabini turned around, as fast as lightning. "What? Draco!"

Draco shook his head, not embarrassed, but feeling that he maybe should be. "I can't," he repeated. He handed the little bottle back. "We can do other things, maybe. Just not - that."

Zabini looked torn between disappointment and relief. "Okay," he said uncertainly. "Just tell me… what you want."

To be left alone, Draco thought, but didn't voice it. "Do you want to - ah - go down on me again?" Damn him for stumbling, there.

Zabini didn't seem to mind, though. "Okay," he said again, more enthusiastically. For someone who'd bedded as many people as he had, he seemed awfully insecure, Draco thought lazily, as Zabini's mouth closed over him again. Ah. Bliss. Really quite lovely. Shame that Zabini was such a twat most of the time, and on the wrong side of this whole war business. Perhaps the insecurity was only instigated by the fact that it was *him*. One could only hope.

Draco was on his back, thighs sprawling open, while Zabini sucked him hungrily, eagerly, his tongue doing wonderfully sinful things to his cock. If he'd been able to reach, Draco would have reciprocated in some way, but as it was, he couldn't. So, he folded his arms beneath his head and watched Zabini work, saw the furtive fist jerking beneath the long, tanned body, hips pumping in as the dark head bobbed over Draco's flesh. It was good, so very good… Draco moaned without meaning to, and, encouraged, Zabini sped up, moaning himself, which sent vibrations all through Draco's cock. A slight grazing of teeth, far too gentle to have been an accident, and Draco was almost there - Zabini's hand came up to cup his balls, one finger tracing the seam dividing them, and with a jerk of his hips, Draco was *there*, at last, coming in hot spurts into Zabini's talented mouth. He could see Zabini coming, too, a second later, his muffled moaning sounding around Draco's now very sensitive cock.

Zabini lifted his head and they stared at each other, both breathing heavily. Then Zabini inched up and laid himself on Draco's chest, their softened cocks meeting and rubbing gently. A questioning look, and then Zabini's mouth was on his again, fingers running over Draco's still-hardened nipples. He'd never tasted himself in someone else's mouth before, and it was not unpleasant.

Between the strenuous Quidditch practice and this, Draco was ready for a nap. But not here. He gently separated his mouth from Zabini's, and began to wriggle himself out from under the other. "Thanks," he said shortly, but not as shortly as he could have said it. He peered around the edge of the curtains, but the dorm was still empty. Draco quickly gathered his clothes, then went to his own bed, nude.

"Any time," Zabini's voice came, hoarse from the deep-throating.

Really rather sexy, Draco reflected muzzily, before pulling his curtains closed. Perhaps he should take Zabini up on that - he knew what he was doing, definitely, and if he was willing to stay monogamous, that might almost be worth consideration.

Just as his eyes were drifting closed, though, an unbidden memory of that moment with the lube came into Draco's mind, and he stiffened where he lay. Why had that happened? Why had he hesitated like that? Why *not* just fuck Zabini and be done with it? That's what Zabini had offered, anyway. The answer was there, on the edges of Draco's mental periphery, but he preferred to let himself think he didn't know.

Sleep overtook him then, and it was a blessed relief.

* * *

NEWT's came and went. Draco studied feverishly for weeks beforehand, then came out second only to bloody Granger. It was the best he could have hoped for, really. And no one cared. Well, maybe Snape, with the Potions NEWT, but no one else cared. Unlike OWL's, NEWT results came out almost immediately, due to the fact that young wizards and witches needed to be applying for careers and so forth immediately upon graduation. Draco, naturally, was not going into a career. Summer training started the week after graduation, which was the next day.

And then Hogwarts would be behind him forever. If only its ghosts could stay where there were - there in the draughty, old castle, where Draco's entire life had changed within the course of just a few months.

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Chapter: 6

Chapter 6: Training Camp

Draco wiped the sweat from his forehead and headed into the common bathroom at the end of the makeshift campsite with relief. The chamber was dank and dim, the walls already lined thickly with cobwebs and their very-much-alive occupants. Weasley would have a fit. Draco moved to the sinks and began running cold water, waiting for the rust to clear before dipping his hands into it and leaning over to splash his grimy face. Looking up, he caught sight of his reflection and grimaced.

His face was wet and flushed, visible even in the greenish mirror. His hair was slicked back almost the way it used to be, when his father still dictated his hairstyle. The cheeks had hollowed in only a week, and he thought that he looked older already. His hair, when not wet, was lighter already, too. His lips were dry and chapped. Grimacing afresh, Draco withdrew the muggle chapstick from his pocket and applied it liberally. The past week had been the most gruelling physical experience of his lifetime. It really was boot camp, no matter what Dumbledore said in those gentle-sounding speeches. *Gentle, ha,* Draco thought viciously, washing his face again.

Glancing about perfunctorily - there was no one in sight, good - Draco headed back to his tent.

It was no wizard tent, either - Shacklebolt, who appeared to be overseeing their training the most directly, had insisted that they learn to rough it. Muggle-style, as they would if they ever had need to camp out during the war. Doing what, precisely, no one had yet articulated as such, but Draco got the gist: nothing pleasant lay ahead.

The interior of the tent was cramped. Since they each had their own (Dumbledore's insistence), there was not much need of space. Magic was allowed within the tent, but only certain charms. Thankfully, *lumos* was one of them. However, at present it was only about six in the afternoon; no need for that one just yet. Draco stared dismally about the interior, and thought of the Manor. Just once. The tent was high enough to allow for his six feet in the center, but nowhere else, which meant hunching and slouching about the rest of it - which was not extensive. He had his bedroll, his trunk, his Firebolt (not that there was much need for that these days), and that was about it. And somehow, it was lonelier than anything he'd ever dreamt of.

He missed Crabbe and Goyle, who were, obviously, not there. Likely off doing the same sort of thing, only with MacNair and Rabastan Lestrange barking out the training drills. Draco shuddered. Death Eater training camp was *not* something he wanted to think about. He even missed Zabini. After their last encounter, back in April, nothing more had happened. Not for lack of trying on Zabini's part, either - but Draco found that, somehow, he just wasn't interested any more. Similarly, his interactions with Potter had been slim to none. Funny looks, plenty of tension, and not much more. Draco had been so immersed in studying for his NEWT's, which were a safe diversion from his personal life that he'd hardly seen Potter at all in the last month

and a bit of school.

Zabini had gotten bitter. Their last conversation had been short and not particularly sweet.

"You're a goddamned, bloody tease!" Zabini had snapped.

"Why can't you accept that I just don't want this?" Draco had asked, frustratedly running his fingers through his hair. "I'm not interested. Plain and simple."

"You were interested enough to let me suck your dick last month!" Zabini accused angrily.

A shrug. "That was then," Draco had said evasively. "I gave it a chance. I'm not interested. I'm sorry."

"Fuck you, Malfoy! Fuck you to the seven hells!"

"Eloquent," Draco had said sarcastically. "I said I'm sorry. What more do you want?"

Zabini had stared at him, shaking his head. "If you don't know, then I'm not going to tell you."

"Suit yourself."

"I hate you."

"You wish you hated me," Draco had corrected quietly.

"Yeah, you're right," Zabini had responded tersely. "I do wish I did. But I'm going to make you sorry for this, Malfoy. Mark that."

Draco had just nodded absently. "Whatever. Do what you want."

"I fucking hate you."

"Sorry to hear it."

And that had been that. Draco had begun counting down the days until term was officially over, until he could leave this trap of a castle for a trap of a different sort.

Training camp was that, alright. They were being forced to run laps, do weight training, and endless amounts of defensive and offensive spellwork. It was all group work, but sometimes the groups changed. Potter hadn't been in his group this week, but that would change tomorrow. Weasley had been, to their mutual chagrin. The trainees were mostly familiar, some from other places. Viktor Krum was there, to both Draco's and Weasley's mutual annoyance. It was, perhaps, the only thing they had in common. Weasley was clearly pining for Granger, who appeared rather oddly neutral in terms of the two wizards and her preference, and Draco was simply not thrilled to have *two* Seekers around who were both better than him. Because it certainly wasn't enough that Potter was - no, they had to share their training time with a world-famous Seeker who was only a little older than both of them, too.

Draco hated being bested. There had been a pick-up Quidditch game earlier in the week, and he had not gone. Both Potter and Krum had, and besides, no one had invited him. Draco hadn't spoken or been spoken to for the entire week. It was, in many ways, a relief. Draco was thoroughly tired at the end of each day, and not willing to put out the effort, anyway. He was the only Slytherin there, and the other Hogwarts graduates clearly looked upon his presence with scorn. Except for Potter, perhaps, who appeared rather oddly neutral about the entire thing. Like Draco was neither there nor absent. Otherwise, he was quite lonely.

Weasley was absurdly talented at casting Stinging hexes, and Draco rubbed his shoulder where it ached, kneeling on his makeshift bed. Hooch, who had been overseeing the hexing lesson that afternoon, hadn't quite removed it fully. Draco pulled out a book to look up a proper cure.

There was a light scratching at the entrance to his tent; the apparently accepted signal for a knock - Draco wouldn't know; no one had "knocked" at his tent before. But that was what he had heard. "Who is it?" he asked tiredly. Probably McGonagall, that bloody obnoxious Tonks, or perhaps some other toady sent to inform him of some schedule change or some such thing.

"Uh, it's Harry," the visitor responded, sounding rather uncertain.

Damn it, he was not letting Potter in here. Draco jumped to his feet. "Just a second," he said. *Why* was he nervous? His heart was beating so rapidly that it was almost a flutter. Just because Potter hadn't spoken to him since the last time he'd kissed Draco was no cause to get all… stupid. "I'll come out," he added. No matter what the reason for Potter's unexpected visit, neutral territory was still the best choice. He unzipped the flap and stepped out, uncomfortably aware that he was still sweaty and that his face was probably grimy from the humidity within the small tent.

Potter was sweaty, too, if that was any comfort. He'd obviously visited the sinks as well; the telltale signs of wet hair above his forehead showed that quite clearly. He, too, looked slightly older, more hardened, already. He had his arms crossed defensively. Draco straightened after zipping the tent flap closed (otherwise, all manner of wildlife were likely to find their way in) and turned to face Potter, unconsciously crossing his own arms across his chest. He raised his eyebrows pointedly, waiting. "What can I do for you?" he asked coolly.

Potter looked agitated. "Look - uh, Malfoy - I just - "

"It's Draco," Draco interrupted coldly. "My father disowned me three weeks ago."

Potter's expression changed, looking rather stricken. "Oh - gods, M - Draco, I'm sorry - I hadn't heard."

"No, you wouldn't have," Draco agreed, his voice hard. "What do you want?"

Potter's arms and expression both tightened again. "I just wanted to say that - well - I don't really know how to say this, but I don't - look, Dumbledore's opinion means the world to me right now. I can't let him down, I have to get ready for this war. You know about the Prophecy by now, I guess; everyone seems to - so I really can only concentrate on my training right now, and I just - I wanted to say that I don't have time to - well - play games with you any more." He drew a deep breath. "So, if we could just forget about - all that, from spring - "

Draco stared at him, aware that his heart was beating audibly, blood pounding against his eardrums. "Are you trying to imply that I've been pursuing you?"

More agitation. "No," Potter said, chewing the inside of his cheek. "But - "

"You're just taking precautions in case I get any funny ideas," Draco said flatly.

"Something like that, yeah," Potter said, suddenly cool. The green eyes - gods, but they were green - flickered up to meet Draco's eyes briefly.

"Well, you can go and fuck yourself," Draco said, through gritted teeth. "It's not like *I* kissed *you*, you near-sighted blight on humanity. *You're* the one who took off on me when I asked if we could talk about a purely platonic subject - i.e., the war, my father, all of *this*. And now you have the gall to seek me out and tell me you're not interested?" His voice rose at the end, becoming both incredulous and increasingly angry. "Fuck you, Potter! It's not as though I'm pushing myself in here where I'm obviously not wanted, anyway, or stealing your friends, or drowning in popularity! Why don't you just fuck off and leave me alone - like I was before?"

Potter looked startled. A hand came up to push hair that was not obscuring his vision out of the way. Several expressions flitted across his features before he settled on aloof coolness. "Well, I'm just saying," he said. "It's not my fault you don't have any friends. Maybe if you were nicer to people - "

"I'm not listening to this," Draco said angrily. He turned, stooped, and jerked the zipper of his tent flap back open. "Fuck off." He retreated into the safety of his tent and yanked the zipper down again.

Potter was silenced. After a moment, Draco heard his footsteps crunching over the dry grass, heading back in the direction of his and Weasley's tents. The women's tents were on the far side of the field, and a particular warding charm held members of the opposite sex from entering each other's tents. Heterosexual visiting was apparently to be done out in the open. Shacklebolt had been particularly clear on that point - they were here to train for battle, not to engage in summer-camp-type relationships. Draco remembered having stiffly kept himself from glancing at Potter, who had to be thinking along the same lines as he was.

Alone in his tent again, Draco fumed. Had there only been a little more space, he would have stormed around and probably thrown things. As it was, he peeled off his damp shirt and hurled it with force to the floor. That *bastard*! Of all the uncalled-for, jerk-arsed attacks. It was hardly as though Draco had been scratching at Potter's tent every night, begging to be granted entrance, pleading for Potter's time and attention and affections. Hardly! He had avoided Potter every bit as thoroughly as Potter had avoided him.

A tiny voice in Draco's head timidly suggested that perhaps Potter was rather overly defensive.

Pushing Draco back to save himself the temptation of disobeying Shacklebolt's decree. Still! Draco raged, to himself. He decided to skip dinner in the eating lodge in favour of eating crackers by himself, in the tent. Anything to avoid that fucker.

Another voice in Draco's head reminded him that he would be seeing said fucker in duelling at dawn the next day. Shoving the crackers away, Draco took a sip of water and shoved off the rest of his clothes. He crawled into his bed nude (after the perfunctory check for wildlife that meant him nothing but harm) and curled up on his side, too depressed for words.

* * *

Dawn came all too soon, and before he'd consumed anywhere *near* enough coffee, Draco was back out on the training field. Field Three, to be precise. It was cool in the early morning, and Draco shivered in his jeans and t-shirt, the latter embroidered with the mandatory *DA* logo. *When did I become a cadet?* Draco wrapped his arms around himself. He knew he'd be warm enough in a few minutes, but right now, it was bloody freezing.

His group this week consisted of Longbottom, whose teeth were chattering - Longbottom had been in his group last week, too, and had proved something of an eye-opener. Definitely more talented than his earlier years had revealed, at any rate. Granger, mercifully, was still in a different group. Krum was there, looking as though he would not be awake for another few hours, at least, blinking slowly and looking rather foolish; some Hufflepuff girl was there (something Bones, perhaps?), chatting lightly with that fool, Macmillan. Neither had been in his group last week. Draco glanced around for Potter. He was nowhere in sight.

Shacklebolt was going over a clipboard with Moody - Draco's heart sank; the two toughest trainers, today. Great. Shacklebolt looked up. "Where's Potter?" he wanted to know.

The other four exchanged looks and shrugs. As usual, Draco was ignored, which suited him just fine. He scowled at the flattened grass. "Well, someone go and get him," Shacklebolt sighed. "Must've overslept again. Longbottom, would you go? Tell him it's ten demerits this time."

Longbottom swallowed and nodded, apparently not relishing the thought of rousting Potter with a message like that. He turned without a word and headed back toward the men's tents. Shacklebolt muttered to Moody until Longbottom returned. "He's just coming, sir," the former Gryffindor reported meekly.

"Good," Shacklebolt growled. "We haven't got all day."

Footsteps pounded, and Potter appeared in view, looking dishevelled, shoving his glasses up his nose as he came. There were long, red marks left from his bedding on his face. Had it been anyone else, Draco would have snickered to himself. As it was, he simply turned away. His cheeks were warm. Stupid *fucker*.

"Good morning," Moody growled. "That's ten demerits."

"I know, I know," Potter said irritably. "I'm *sorry*."

"Watch your tone," Shacklebolt said, without fire. "Listen up, folks. Today we're starting on proper duelling. Any curses or hexes are open to you, so long as they aren't Unforgivables. Got that?"

Murmured assent or nods followed this.

"Now, there are six to each group, so we'll split into three pairs, which I'll assign: Potter and Macmillan, Longbottom and Bones, Krum and Malfoy. Moody here will assist with any healing you can't perform on yourselves. Any questions?"

Silence.

"Good," Shacklebolt said. "Pair off and go."

Draco turned toward Krum, whom he'd never spoken to before. Krum ambled over, looking surly. Draco decided to give polite a shot. "Good morning," he said coolly - not forgetting Krum's Quidditch record - and held out a hand.

Krum looked at it for a moment, as though trying to recall the standard response to this gesture. After a moment, he took Draco's hand and squeezed it in a rather painfully hard grasp. He fought not to wince. "Good morning," Krum said, making it sound like an oath. He glanced at the horizon, where the sun was perched. "If it is that already."

Draco smiled wryly. "Apparently it is," he said. "Didn't you get the memo?"

Krum stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Never mind," Draco said, with a private, inward sigh. "Shall we get to it, then?"

Krum shrugged. "Alright. If ve haff to." He slouched off away from Draco, as the other two pairs were doing, then turned to face him.

After the count, Draco hit Krum with a disarming hex, followed by a boil-inducing one. It was elementary stuff, but Krum was obviously still half-stunned by the early hour. Moody shouted at him, though - "Come on, Malfoy! That's elementary stuff! Stop messing around!"

Draco gritted his teeth. Krum got to his feet, fetched his wand, and they went again. Draco hit him with a Stinging hex and then a Burning hex right after it. Krum cursed and grasped his forearm. Draco waited, while the Bulgarian healed it. "Ready?" he called.

Krum got into proper battle stance now and posed himself defensively. "Yes."

Draco raised his arm to whip out a trip jinx, his personal favourite - so convenient, while you were trying to think of something better, and Krum sent a sizzling Burn hex right back at him. Draco ducked and felt it skim just over his shoulder. The jinx caught Krum and he staggered - managing to toss another burning spell, a different one, at Draco anyway.

He caught it on his shirt, which burst into fire. "Shit!" Draco conjured water, quickly, holding his t-shirt off his abdomen, and put out the fire. Damn, that had hurt. But now was not the time to inspect the damage. He narrowed his eyes and aimed. "*Infligus!*"

The invisible blow knocked Krum across the head, sending him to his knees again, reeling. Still obviously dizzy, he struggled to his feet, staggering, and aimed. He looked awake now, and quite dangerous, his heavy brow creased. "*Plango vulnerus!*" he shouted.

The significantly heavier and unfamiliar curse struck Draco squarely in the middle of the forehead, and the last thing he saw before blacking out was the red in his eyes.

Moody's face was the first thing he saw upon opening his eyes, and it wasn't pretty, especially at this range. Draco groaned and closed his eyes again.

"Is he okay?" he heard someone ask, voice tense. Potter. Draco decided to just stay where he was and pray for death to take him.

"He will be," Moody growled.

"What on earth were you thinking, using Dark magic?" Shacklebolt was demanding, shaking Krum by the shoulders. "Fifty demerits!"

"I - I did not realize it vos a Dark spell," Krum was stuttering, clearly upset and rather frightened of Shacklebolt. "I - is he alright?"

Shacklebolt came over, then. "Moody? Malfoy? How are you doing?"

"Just peachy," Draco managed, horrified to hear his voice come out so weak.

"Up you get, then, boy," Moody said, still growling. Damn, that magical eye was creepy this close! At least the jerk had stopped calling him Ferret, like he had on the first day.

Draco ignored Moody's gnarled, proffered hand, and pushed himself into a sitting position. There was something red on his face, and he touched his forehead gingerly. Ouch. Fuck, he was bleeding. Great. Of all things, why did he have to get injured in front of Potter? He stared at the blood on his hand, then decided to ignore it. He got to his feet, swaying.

"I don't really think he's okay," the Bones girl observed cautiously, speaking as though he wasn't there. "He looks pretty dizzy."

Shacklebolt gave him a perfunctory glance. "Malfoy? You feel up to continuing?"

Draco wanted to answer, but a wave of nausea hit him just then. He kept himself very still, praying that he wouldn't vomit in front of everyone. But he couldn't open his mouth.

"He's gone green," Macmillan said loudly. "Jeez, Krum, what'd you do to him?"

"I guess it vos too hard," Krum said unhappily, sounding guilty. "It vos curse to strike, hard. It hit his head."

Potter swore then. "Krum - !"

Whatever he was going to say was cut off by the occurrence of Draco swaying, falling to his knees and vomiting all over the grass in front of him. Shacklebolt and Moody both jumped back, but the Hufflepuff girl came forward. "Merlin, Krum!" she exclaimed.

Great. Krum had all but killed him, and they still wouldn't talk to him. The students, that was. Bones came closer and vanished the vomit, adding a *scourgify* at Draco for good measure. It didn't change the fact that his mouth still tasted of it, though, or that it could very well happen again. Bones conjured a glass of water. "Just take a little sip," she cautioned.

Draco took the cold glass and took a *very* tiny sip, which he didn't swallow. Rather, he swished the water about in his mouth and spat it out again, hating the world. He pressed the glass to his aching head. Blood seeped gently down its side, mingling with the condensation. He closed his eyes.

Moody bent down. "Want to take a five-minute break?" he suggested gruffly.

Draco didn't answer. Potter's voice, angry, answered for him. "Moody! He's obviously going to need longer than that! Look at him!" It was accusatory, as though Draco were negligent in his duty. He longed to have the energy to open his mouth and curse Potter to every form of damnation that he knew of, but just couldn't. At least his clothes were still clean.

Moody looked at Shacklebolt. "Fine, take the morning off, then," Shacklebolt said, not unkindly. "You don't look very well, Malfoy. Do you need to see Madam Pomfrey?"

Draco hated the woman, but still could not muster speech.

"I don't think he can talk yet, sir," Longbottom ventured.

Shacklebolt sighed, as though Draco were the largest inconvenience known to wizarding kind. "Someone - Potter - help him to the Infirmary tent then, please."

"Sir - " Potter's voice was protesting, but Shacklebolt would have none of it.

"Now, Potter. Just go. Then get back here. Dumbledore won't want you missing any of this."

Potter threw Shacklebolt a dirty look, as though to say *Then why don't you send someone else?*, but he came over to Draco. He hesitated, then held out his hand. Draco glared at him, but took it. He had no choice. Potter hauled him to his feet - not roughly, but Draco could hardly move for himself.

"Merlin," Potter muttered. "Can you walk, even?"

Draco took a step, and his feet had turned to cement, weighing thousands of pounds each. He staggered sideways into Potter. Potter caught him, one arm around Draco's back, the other hand beneath Draco's forearm, helping him along. Step by achingly-slow step, they made their way to the Infirmary tent. Pomfrey was bending over someone at the other end, and looked up when they got in. Potter explained briefly what had happened. Pomfrey clucked her tongue and said, "Well, I'm just in the middle of something here, Potter - could you get him settled for me, please? That bed at the end will do."

Potter sighed and agreed, helping Draco to the bed. It was a real bed, even it was a hospital version of one.

"Shoes, socks and trousers off, please, Potter!" Pomfrey called, turning her back on them.

Draco's face was burning. He fumbled for his own belt buckle. "Don't," he said, the word croaking. His head was on fire. "Llldoot." He'd meant *I'll do it*, but the words wouldn't come out.

"Don't be an idiot," Potter said. "You can't even talk." Quickly, efficiently, and averting his eyes the entire time (as far as it was possible), Potter stripped him of his trousers, pulling the trainers off first. He left the socks, then said, "Sorry about this." Without further warning, he scooped

Draco up and placed him in the bed, to Draco's lasting humiliation. Once he was there, Potter pulled the blankets up around him, then went to the end of the bed and found Draco's feet. Pulling off his socks, Potter asked tersely, "So, do you need anything before Pomfrey comes over here?"

Draco wanted to shake his head, but it hurt too much. "Nnnn."

"Pain reliever, I'll tell her," Potter said, actually getting it. "And I'll just get you some water."

Draco closed his eyes again, and the room swam. He blacked out.

When he woke up, someone was forcing potion into his mouth. The pain lifted significantly, and some of the haze cleared from his vision. "I'll get another blanket, he's shivering," a maternal voice - Pomfrey's - said.

There was something else touching him, on his forehead. Something cool. A cold cloth, maybe? It felt good. Draco hoped rather fervently - or as fervently as he was capable of feeling at the moment - that it was not Granger or someone like her holding it there. He opened his eyes and looked up.

Potter's green eyes met his steadily. Draco stared into them for many long minutes, during which neither of them spoke.

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Chapter: 7

Chapter 7: A Game of Quidditch

After a bit, Potter looked away. "Madam Pomfrey told me to do this," he muttered.

Draco found that he was able to raise his arm and did, pushing Potter's hand off the cool, damp cloth. "Well, you don't have to any more," he said, voice still slightly hoarse.

"Krum's in a lot of trouble," Potter said, obviously uncomfortable. "He got into trouble for doing Dark stuff last week, too."

Draco closed his eyes. "If he doesn't know the difference, what's the point in punishing him?"

Potter was silent. After a bit, he said, "Yeah, I guess that's a fair point. I remember you saying that they actually learn the Dark arts at Durmstrang. Krum said that the distinctions were never really made clear, like they didn't matter much."

"Didn't realize you were such good friends with him." Draco's tongue felt thick and sluggish, and talking required more effort than he wanted to let on.

Another short pause. "Didn't realize you *weren't*," Potter returned. "You were all friendly with him back in fourth year, as I recall."

"Only at the beginning," Draco said, stung. "Then he got too studious and snagged on Granger's charms, as I recall. I haven't even talked to him since that first week. I don't even think he remembers me."

"Well, that's a mercy for him, then," Potter said nastily - possibly pissed about the Granger comment.

His head was going to split open. "Fuck off," Draco said distinctly.

"That's a marvellous idea," Potter said, jumping to his feet. At the entrance to the medical tent, though, he paused. "There's more pain reliever on that table beside you, if you need it," he said, his tone stiff.

Draco ignored him, and Potter left. Alone again. Carefully, he turned himself on his side and clenched his jaw, fighting back the ridiculous urge to cry. It was just an accident, just a little head injury that would clear up soon. By that evening, probably. Draco pulled his legs up to his chest and wrapped the blankets tighter, feeling like a lost child. It was ridiculous. There was no need to feel that way. He would be eighteen years old at the end of July, and a full-fledged soldier by the end of August. He would *not* cry. Crying was for people like Longbottom, Draco told himself

firmly, trying to replace that aching void with his usual scorn. It would not come.

He did not cry. But even as he drifted to sleep, the terrible, aching lump in his throat did not dissipate.

And when he woke several hours later, he knew one thing that he had not known, at least not as such, before. He liked Potter, damn it. He wanted Potter to like him back, but of course, the stupid fucker didn't. Or would never admit it if he did. Draco stared at the wall beside his bed and vividly relived those two, bittersweet kisses. It felt like they had happened years ago.

* * *

Pomfrey returned several times throughout the day, checking on him and giving him more potion. By supper time, Draco was chafing to leave. She insisted that he spend the night, though. He was secretly relieved; the bed was certainly a good deal more comfortable than the bedroll in his tent. She brought him dinner and left him to eat it alone. Apparently, their dislike was mutual.

* * *

Sometime later, around nine o'clock or so, Draco heard a familiar sound. Hedwig. He looked up in glad surprise, and the snowy owl flew through the open tent flap and over to his waiting knee. He'd sat up, and was reading some of the training manuals which Pomfrey had left for his perusal. "Hedwig!" he said, and could not keep the gladness from his voice. Didn't try.

She hooted and bit his finger affectionately. "What are you doing here, girl?" Draco asked fondly, stroking her sleek, feathered head. "I thought that master of yours was keeping you in his stuffy, little tent all this time."

She hooted again and rustled her wings indignantly, as if to say that she went where she pleased, thank you very much. Draco laughed and wondered if he'd gone around the bend, finding so much pleasure in the company of at least *one* living creature who did not find his entire existence repugnant.

Another sound caught his ear, and Potter had returned. Draco's good spirits evaporated. His pulse quickened, to his own annoyance, though he now understood *why* it had to do that, and he told himself not to let Potter bait him. He kept his eyes on Hedwig and refused to look up.

Potter approached slowly, as if he was nervous. Good, Draco thought viciously. He deserves every inch of discomfort. "How're you doing?" he asked awkwardly.

Draco shrugged and refused to speak.

"It - er - it looks like the cut is healed," Potter stuttered. "Are you feeling better?"

Draco let his voice be as frosty as he could make it. Shot a cool, icy-grey look at the other. "I'm fine. Not that you would care. What are you doing here?"

Potter bit his lip. "I - I wanted to apologize, for - uh - before," he said.

"You're going to have to be more specific, I'm afraid," Draco said, in a passably good impression of his old drawl. "You've been a complete bastard quite a bit lately, so forgive me if I don't know exactly *which* 'before' you're referring to."

Potter drew in a deep breath. "All of it," he said. "I meant both this morning - and - uh, the day before yesterday."

Draco stroked Hedwig's head again, very deliberately, considering his reply. Finally, he said, "Okay. Fine. You've apologized." He couldn't quite bring himself to add, *Now go away.*

Another breath. "You were doing really well, before the curse," Potter said. Was he trying to make conversation? "I - I saw some of it - just peripherally, you know."

"Hmm," Draco said, non-committally.

"I thought you could - maybe - use some company," Potter said, with a flailing sort of gesture toward his owl. "So - I brought Hedwig."

I would rather have you, you twat. "Yes, I can see that," Draco said, not quite sarcastically.

"Right," Potter said quickly. Gods, he was awkward. "Uh - I was wondering if you still wanted to - um - talk, at all. About your father, or any of that."

Draco's lips compressed slightly. "Bit late for that now, isn't it?"

"Well - I know it's later than what you - but I thought - maybe - you might still want to talk about it," Potter said jerkily.

Draco sighed. "What do you want to know?"

Potter shifted his weight. "Can I sit down?"

"It's not my tent."

Pause. Then Potter decided to ignore this and sat in the chair where he'd been earlier, when he'd been pressing the cold cloth onto Draco's forehead. "So - why did your father disown you, then?" he asked. The tone was neither curious nor disgusted. Just - neutral.

"Kind of obvious, isn't it? I skip the weekend when I was supposed to be initiated and Marked, refuse to answer his letters - obviously, he came to the correct assumption that I wasn't *going* to respond or go." Draco delivered this all fairly smoothly and, he thought, with a remarkable lack of bitterness.

"Did he write again, to ask why you hadn't responded, or anything?" Potter asked, biting a nail.

"No." He couldn't keep the bitterness out that time. "No, I don't suppose I matter enough. To anyone," Draco added pointedly.

Potter actually winced. "I shouldn't have said that, about you not having friends, before," he said, sounding guilty. Gryffindor guilt complex.

Draco shrugged. "It's true enough," he said. "I'm not a particularly nice person. I've never pretended I was."

Potter shot a look at him. "But you're not as - as bad as you try to make people think you are," he said.

"Whatever. The point is, I burned the bridge. I'm on this side now, and I don't suppose it would hurt if someone *on* this sound could give me the time of day every so often, but apparently not. I might as well not exist here. The only people who even talk to me are the trainers, and the only times people talk *about* me is when I've fucked something up." Draco said this all with a glare.

Potter ran a hand through his hair, distractedly. "Fuck, Draco, I'm sorry. I really am. I'll - I don't know. What do you want?"

Draco could not answer this. *You.* "I don't know," he mumbled.

The silence grew between them. "Do you have to stay here overnight?" Potter asked. He stretched then, arms above his head, pulling up the hem of his worn t-shirt. An inch or two of hard, muscled abdomen was exposed, olive/tan and quite lovely. Draco swallowed, looking at it.

"Yes," he said, answering the question and forcing himself to look away. How could he have not realized this before?

"Too bad," Potter said, sympathetically. "I hate having to sleep in the hospital."

"Better than those bedrolls," Draco said, with a slight shrug.

"True, I guess," Potter conceded. There was a funny sort of relaxation between them. "We might play Quidditch tomorrow night," Potter said carefully. "If we do, you should come."

Draco stalled. "Where do you play?" The curiosity was driving him mad.

"Field Seven. Hermione conjured up these hoops that just levitate. You can't touch them or they fall, but it's better than nothing. Most of the Quidditch players brought their brooms, and Krum has a Snitch with an *Accio* response built in - we've got enough people to cover all the positions." Potter's voice was tugging at him, persuading.

The taste of bitterness flooded his mouth again. "You already have two Seekers," Draco said, looking away.

"You could always - "

"I don't play the other positions."

Potter absorbed this. Then - "I could play a different position, or Krum could," Potter offered. "Actually, Krum probably still feels so bad about - you know, today - that he would offer his spot. But if he doesn't, then I'll play something else."

"You've never played anything else, either."

"I know."

Draco hesitated. "When do you start?"

"After dinner sometime, we were thinking. If we're not too tired. I guess it depends what we're doing tomorrow. But would you want to come?"

"How would I know when to - "

"I'll come by," Potter promised.

"What should I wear?"

"Just whatever you have on. We played shirts and skins last time - muggle-style."

Draco gave in. He *really* wanted to play. "Okay, then."

Potter's eyes lit up, for just a second, before he restrained himself again. "Alright," he said calmly. "Good. Well, I should, uh, get to bed."

"Right. Be ready for your training and all," Draco said coolly.

Potter's face took on a guarded look. "Right," he agreed. "Well - see you tomorrow, then."

"Potter." The ex-Gryffindor was at the doorway already, and stopped to look back, eyebrows raised. "Your owl," Draco said, nodding toward Hedwig.

Potter smiled in the gloom. "It's fine if she stays here for the night. Until she goes hunting, or whatever."

Draco didn't know what to say. It was the first nice thing anyone had done for him in a long time. "Okay," he said, feeling that it was inadequate. But other words did not come.

Potter just nodded, and left.

* * *

Draco was sitting in his tent, worn out from the day's work, but ridiculously excited about the coming match. Running laps were *not* his specialty, though he was doing just fine at it (not like that sloucher Macmillan, at any rate) - but flying was natural, easy, wonderful. He would feel at home again. He'd changed t-shirts, and was waiting, cross-legged, not doing anything else but waiting. It occurred to his memory that Potter had said they might not play, if people were too tired, and Draco tried to guard against the disappointment he would feel if the game was called off. It was no use - he wanted to play more than anything. He would go out there and fly by himself if Potter didn't come by, say, eight. Half-past eight.

Draco's triceps were aching from the rigorous workout Shacklebolt and Hooch had put them through that afternoon. Pomfrey had insisted that Draco take the morning easy, and had not released him until half-past ten. He'd arrived at the lesson on Shield-strengthening late, but Dumbledore and Flitwick had accepted it without fuss. A small mercy. His group had not said anything, but Potter had offered a very small smile. Draco had returned it with a quick nod, then tried to blend in as though he'd been there all along. *Malfoys adapt.* A voice from the past.

The scratching at his tent flap startled him so badly that Draco almost jumped out of his skin. "Yes?" he called, his voice obnoxiously higher than normal in his excitement.

"It's Harry," Potter identified himself. "Are you still up for a quick match?"

"Sure!" Draco was on his feet in a second, unzipping the flap with one hand and grabbing his Firebolt with the other.

Potter was waiting with a grin and his own Firebolt just outside. "I can't wait to play," he said happily.

"Me neither," Draco admitted, falling into step. They walked to Field Seven in a more or less companionable silence, broken only infrequently.

"Are you feeling okay today?"

"Much better. Thanks."

"Krum feels really bad about it."

"Yeah, he said." Draco felt an energy in his step he hadn't felt in… years, possibly. Had it been that long? *It's just because I'm playing Quidditch again,* he tried to convince himself. But he knew it had more to do with the company than the game.

* * *

"So, Team One," Potter read out, "will be: Chasers - the Patil twins and Justin Finch-Fletchley; Beaters - Zacharias Smith and Ernie Macmillan; Keeper - Ron Weasley, and Seeker - Viktor Krum." Draco tossed a startled look at Potter, but he went on. "Team Two will be: Chasers - Susan Bones, Terry Boot, and myself; Beaters - the Weasley twins; Keeper - Neville Longbottom, and Seeker - Draco Malfoy." Potter looked up. "Any questions?"

"Yeah, I didn't play last time," Smith said, his tone surly. "If we're playing shirts and skins, what

about the girls?"

"Oh, they play skins, too, don't you worry," one of the Weasley twins - Draco had no idea which - said, jokingly.

"Well, there *are* only three girls," Potter said practically. "Two of them look the same and are Beaters on the team that's wearing shirts, like we agreed last time. Can't we all just remember that Susan's on Team Two, even if she's wearing a shirt, too?"

This seemed to make sense with everyone, so the game - and a number of shirts - was off. Draco wanted to ask Potter why he was Chasing instead of Seeking - but held the question back. Instead, he just let himself rise off the ground with his broom when everyone else did, and began to search for Krum's Snitch. It was nowhere in sight. Krum had released it an hour earlier to give it a head start. Granger had purportedly put wards around Field Seven to prevent its escape, despite Krum's charm on it. Just in case, she'd said. Weasley had glowered as though he *wanted* Krum to lose his Snitch, regardless of it killing the possibility of any more Quidditch that summer. And to his own horror, Draco suddenly didn't find this as amusing as he used to. Damn Potter. Damn him.

He heard Boot call out ruefully as Potter fumbled with and then dropped the Quaffle, heard Longbottom being reassured by Bones when Team One scored for the first time - where was the Snitch? - heard Weasley (Ron) curse as Boot scored on him. A delighted shout of triumph from Potter when he scored moments later, to Weasley's chagrin. Then, to Draco's astonishment, saw one of the Weasley twins dart in front of him to whack a Bludger away, sending it toward Smith (whom they purportedly disliked intensely). Krum zoomed by, clipping Draco's elbow.

It was proper Quidditch, and Draco was exhilarated. One of the Patil twins scored then. He wasn't exactly sure what the score was; there was no announcer. It was fine. All he had to do was to find the Snitch. There - he caught a glimmering of gold - it was right by Potter's jaw. Potter heard it, turned to look at it, then deliberated caught his eye and grinned. He flew away then, after the Quaffle again, and the Snitch disappeared. Draco cursed under his breath even as his eyes sought Krum - he hadn't seen it. He was still circling. Suddenly, though, the former Durmstrang student went into a dive - Draco followed - but someone was following him. Potter was there, alongside him in a moment. "He's feinting!" Potter said urgently, managing not to shout about the wind, his mouth close to Draco's ear. "Remember at the World Cup?" And with that, he flew off again.

Damn him, he was right - Draco's lips tightened as he realized his near mistake. Krum was just trying to sabotage him - it wasn't enough that he'd almost ended Draco's *life* the other day; he had

to win the Quidditch game, too. The anger fuelled Draco, and his energy level doubled. There. That was better - he played better when he was angry. No Hogwarts Seeker but Potter had ever presented anything of a challenge over the past six years. He always won, except when playing Gryffindor, and those wins had never *felt* like wins. He'd wanted, so *badly*, to beat Potter.

No matter. The opportunity was gone - unless he and Potter were pitted against each other at some point this summer. Draco sped up and searched frantically. Potter flew by him again, brushing his bare arm. It was warm, despite the cool air. Draco's attention was caught, but Potter flew off again. What was that about? Draco pulled his eyes from Potter's gleaming, muscular back and cast about for the Snitch again. There - he saw it! It was hovering by one of the smoky-looking goal hoops, the ones that dissolved and fell down if you touched them by accident. It was hovering lazily, still in the air, right at the edge of one of Longbottom's hoops. There was a yell as Potter scored again, and Draco made his move.

He flew directly up to the hoop, stopping short, daring the Snitch to move. *It* didn't know that he couldn't touch the hoop. The Snitch whirred and darted off. Draco was on it in a second, fingers closing around the struggling wings. He'd done it! He looked around to see if anyone had noticed.

Krum had, and was cursing loudly. Potter looked up suddenly, eyes bright. "Did you catch it?" he yelled across the Field.

Draco held up his arm in triumph.

"Draco caught the Snitch!" Potter screeched. "We won!"

Team Two erupted into cheers, flying generally at Potter, to be sure (rather than at the Seeker, which was *traditional*, as the Seeker usually won or lost the game), but Draco wasn't complaining. Potter, though, by flying over, brought the rest of the team with him. The Weasley twins were flanking him, and Longbottom, Bones and Boot were trailing just after. Draco grinned, though his pulse crept upward at the sight of Potter's bare chest, glistening with sweat. He'd never seen those nipples before, rosy-dark and peaked by the cold air, as Draco supposed his own must be. Suddenly, the entire concept of playing shirts and skins seemed almost appallingly primitive and animalistic. Draco tore his eyes off Potter's body and held out the Snitch in offering.

Potter's fingers closed around his for a moment, taking the Snitch. *Warm.* "Good job," he said, a little more calmly, but sounding out of breath.

"Thanks," Draco said, feeling the exhilaration draining from his body. It was over. Back to normal now. Whatever *that* was, at least.

They all sank to the ground. Team One appeared to be fine with the outcome, with the possible exception of Krum, who looked grouchier than ever. Potter gave him the Snitch, but Krum came over to Draco. "You fly very vell," the Bulgarian said, as though confessing to a crime. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Draco said, surprised by this. He *did* fly well, damn it. Time *somebody* noticed.

"Hey! Somebody help me get the balls back into the case!" Potter called.

People grumbled excuses about this and that, and the earliness of their lessons the next day. Pathetic, really, Draco thought, narrowing his eyes at the lot of them. "I'll help you," he said shortly.

"What? Oh, thanks," Potter said, sounding as surprised as Draco had, a moment earlier. "It's the Bludgers, really - you can summon them, but then they - "

"Yeah, I can guess," Draco said. He felt in his jeans and withdrew his wand. "*Accio* Bludger!" It dove at him from out of the skies, and all but smashed his head in. Wouldn't *that* have been just perfect. He jumped back, then wrestled it to the ground as it bounced and took aim again - there. He'd subdued it. Potter held open the case and quickly got the straps ready as Draco forced it into place. Their fingers ended up touching a lot, and Draco felt his face heating up. He hoped devoutly that Potter wouldn't notice it and start getting all jittery again.

Potter straightened up. "*Accio* Quaffle!" The red ball flew at him and he caught it easily. Draco, still kneeling by the open case, prepared the Quaffle's place as Potter had done for his Bludger. More touching, more blushing (on his part, at least). Draco glanced into Potter's face. The other was making a play of checking the tightness on the Snitch's coverings (Potter had explained that it was Hooch's set and that she didn't want her Snitch used in pick-up games). His fringe brushed against Draco's hair and Draco shivered. Potter noticed, looking up quickly, but didn't say anything. They both got to their feet rather quickly.

"Just one more," Potter said, almost like a prayer. "I'll - "

"No, I will." Draco held out his wand. "*Accio* Bludger!"

This time, it went for his feet, and he jumped. Potter dashed at it on the rebound, but it changed direction mid-air and went for his face. Draco jumped forward and smashed the heel of his fist over it, forcing it down. It bounced back up right between them and they grabbed for it at the same time, tumbling to the ground. Potter swore and his fingers gripped the Bludger tightly, catching Draco's fingers in between. Together, they managed to wrest it into the case. There was much more finger play this time, and Draco was wishing he knew a way to prolong it. The straps were fastened, slowly. They both stilled, both watching their fingers, still touching in places. Then Draco looked up.

Potter looked up, too, his expression wary. Their faces were inches apart over the case. Draco moved the fingers of his right hand over Potter's more definitely. Potter began to back away - but Draco was faster, and grabbed the ex-Gryffindor's face. He crushed their mouths together, and Potter only struggled for a second or two before giving in. Even the struggle was sweet, though - regardless of what might follow, Draco had thought only for this moment, this kiss, right *now*, damn it. Potter's mouth opened under his, and Draco had to be closer to him. He moved around the case; they were kneeling on the ground, facing each other, and somehow their arms had gotten around each other. They were touching from chest to waist, and it was wonderful, but they both wanted *more*, Draco could feel it - their tongues were stroking together now, and it was bliss. Draco didn't want it to end, didn't want to have to talk about it, for there to be awkward questions and weird looks at training tomorrow and whispers among the Gryffindors - he just wanted *this*, this beautiful thing, to go on forever.

They broke apart for breath when it became absolutely necessary, and there was a confused second. "Don't!" Draco said, angry, before pulling Potter to himself again. Potter didn't resist in the slightest this time; rather, he pulled Draco tighter, kissed harder, and his hands moved to Draco's hips. Draco was harder than he'd been in a while, and they were grinding together - Potter was falling onto his back, pulling Draco over him. They rolled over and over on the ground for several long, glorious minutes, mouths still inflicting damage upon each other's, skinny hips thrusting together. Potter's hands were on his arse, and that was exactly where they should be, and Potter's own, jean-clad arse felt firm and perfect beneath his own hands. Their bare chests were sliding against each other's, and they were panting now, into each other's mouths. Draco bit at Pottom's bottom lip, and the other cried out in a combination of pleasure and pain, eyes squeezed tightly closed. And it still wasn't enough. Draco took Potter's right hand and guided it to the button of his jeans. Potter complied easily, his mouth still mouthing over Draco's, and managed to unzip Draco's very-tight jeans. Draco returned the favour, and the cool, night air hit his cock. There - Potter's felt so good in his hand, warm, heavy with desire, pulsing. They were both nearly there already, and after only a few short moments, they were coming and moaning and gasping - no words, just breath - and when it was over, they were kissing again,

kissing and lying still, Potter on top of Draco.

Draco could have died then and been happy, he thought - anything to avoid what was surely coming the next day, or possibly even the next minute. He didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to think -

"Draco." Potter's voice was still rough.

Draco just opened his eyes and waited for the inevitable.

"I really can't do this, you know."

Draco bit back his intense disappointment and fury. It wouldn't do any good. He pushed Potter off of himself, and got up. Shoved his prick back into his jeans and stalked off to find his shirt and his broom. Walked off the field without looking back.

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Chapter: 8

Chapter 8: The Unfinished Letter

Wednesday morning arrived, and it was bitter. Draco woke to the sound of his (spelled) wand beeping horridly. He peeled his eyes open, and shut off the beeping, wondering why he felt so odd. *Oh.* It all came rushing back to him. Last night. Potter. Fuck. Draco felt as though he'd undergone a severe beating; he felt bruised all over. It was only after a few minutes and his first cup of coffee that he realized that the sensation was emotional, not physical. Potter. He had a lesson with Potter in fifteen minutes. The thought was inconceivable. How could he go?

The answer came back to him immediately: how could he *not* go? Draco still had to catch up from Monday - he'd missed the entire day, he had to catch up, prove that he wasn't a waste of Shacklebolt and Moody's time after all, that he could defend himself. And the choices for duelling partners - the odds were just too good that he'd be put with Potter this morning. *I can't handle that*, a voice in his head pled desperately. Draco stood up in his narrow confines of nylon

tent and clenched his fists and his jaw. *You can. You must.* Draco dressed himself, performed a thorough showering spell (vastly preferable to the actual showers; he'd seen them) and spent a solid five minutes breathing deeply and trying to persuade himself to stoop and unzip the tent. Exit it. Go to Field Three.

It took a while, but his natural stubbornness eventually won over, and Draco made his way, defeated by his own will, to Field Three.

Bones, Longbottom, Krum, and Macmillan were all there already. Moody was hunched over the clipboard; Shacklebolt was tightening his shoelaces. He straightened up and noticed Draco. "Good morning, Malfoy," he said, his bass especially deep in light of the early hour. "I trust you're feeling better?"

Draco flushed. "Yes, sir," he said. "I'm fine now. Thanks."

"Good to hear it. We'll be switching the partners around today, anyway. So watch your step, Krum." This last was directed, obviously, at the sleepy Bulgarian, who nodded and fidgeted uncharacteristically.

It was cold, and Draco shivered again, running his palms over the gooseflesh on his upper arms.

Moody looked up then. "It's time," he said, growling. "*Where* is Potter?"

Longbottom sighed. "I'll get him, sir," he volunteered, and jogged off toward Potter's tent without waiting for a response. Draco shoved the mental image of Potter, glasses-less and curled up in a warm, rumpled ball from his head. Thinking hurt.

Potter appeared several moments later, with Longbottom this time. He looked as though he hadn't slept, huge, dark circles beneath his eyes and looking haggard beyond his seventeen years. He kept his eyes on the ground.

"That's twice this week, Potter," Moody growled. "Twenty-five demerits this time."

Potter just nodded and kept his mouth shut, eyes on the grass a few feet in front of him. Moody must have attributed this uncharacteristic lack of cheek as Potter feeling meek about the

chastisement, because he let it pass without comment.

Shacklebolt cleared his throat and read out: "Duelling pairs this morning are: Krum and Bones, Longbottom and Macmillan, Potter and Malfoy. Everyone be good, now. Go to it."

Fuck. Fuck everything. Draco refused to move from his place - but he was torn by his need to work harder today, make up for last time. He knew some Dark curses, too; only he, unlike Krum, knew that they were Dark. He wasn't a Malfoy for nothing. *Malfoys use whatever resources they have at end.* At the moment, Draco was ready to unleash every curse he knew against Potter.

"Potter? Malfoy? Get to work!" Shacklebolt said sharply.

Draco turned reluctantly, facing Potter's general direction, not looking at him. Withdrew his wand. Potter, however, remain exactly where he was.

"Sir," Draco heard him say, in an obvious effort to be quiet, "could I *please* work with someone else this morning? I'm really sorry to ask, but just this once. Please."

"Look, Potter," Shacklebolt returned, lowering his voice in return, "I know you and Malfoy don't get along. But it's business. It's training. You have to put personal stuff aside. Come on, now."

Potter hesitated. "I - can't curse him," he hedged. "Just - not today. Please."

Draco was caught between burning fury and complete indifference. He would *not* let this affect him. He would not. The fury half wanted him to march over there and hold his wand to Potter's throat, tell him that they *would* duel, and they would duel *now*, damn it. The other half of him wanted to go back to the tent and stay there, possibly forever.

"Potter." Shacklebolt's voice hardened. "You'll do as you're told, just this once. Get to it."

Potter turned, looking utterly miserable, toward Draco. Draco dragged his eyes up off the grass and met Potter's gaze. Cursed himself for flinching. He would not show hurt. He could not afford to. Draco drew himself up to his full six feet and squared his shoulders. Let Potter begin this, then. The ball was in his court.

"Ready?" Potter mumbled to the ground.

Draco did not dignify it with an answer, merely brandished his wand.

"One. Two. Three."

Draco levelled his wand. "*Incendio*."

Potter never even raised his wand to defend himself; his shirt caught on fire. Brilliantly. He put it out with a goodly amount of haste, though, then returned to his slack-armed stance.

Draco considered. "*Tarantallegra.*" There was something viciously fun in seeing Potter look such a fool, before he could stop the tap-dancing hex.

"Potter!" Moody growled. "I don't know what you're playing at, boy, but you need to start defending yourself. Stop this moping about; it's called *morning*. I daresay you'll get used to it by the end."

"Don't call me 'boy'," Potter ground out, through his clenched jaw. He aimed and shouted, "*Expelliarmus*!"

Draco ducked and managed to avoid it. He returned the hex and got Potter's wand flung about twenty yards from where the other stood. Another vindictive pleasure.

They duelled in this half-hearted manner until the lesson ended, two hours later - without once having made eye contact. Draco went to lunch and sat by himself. As usual.

* * *

That night, in his tent, Draco heard a light scratching - no, make that more of a jabbing, really. He sat up in his bedroll, cautiously. He hadn't been asleep. It was early yet, but there was nothing else to do. No doubt, the others had gotten together to play ridiculous Hufflepuff games or something tonight, but he had not (naturally) been invited if they had. "Who is it?"

A hoot. Draco's spirits lifted, just a little. "Hedwig?"

Another hoot. Draco was out of his bed in a flash, unzipping the flap. "Come in, girl! What are you doing here?"

The reason for her visit became rather immediately apparent. Hedwig bore, in her beak, a piece of balled-up parchment. Not scrolled, certainly not sealed, and not tied to her leg. Draco looked at her, confused. "What have you got there?"

In answer, she hopped over and deposited it on his lap. "It's for me?" he asked, puzzled.

An affirmative hoot. "But it's not sealed, or rolled up," Draco pointed out. "Are you sure someone sent this? It's not tied to your leg, girl - that's all."

Hedwig gave an offended-sounding hoot anyway, and nudged at the ball of parchment with her beak insistently.

Draco picked it up. It was probably just junk. He gave Hedwig a serious look. "This is probably just junk, you know."

That earned him a bite, a serious one. "Ow! Sorry!" Draco said, rubbing his forearm. "Fine, fine, I'll read it!" He un-balled the parchment, muttering about bossy owls to himself. His eyes skimmed the parchment - it was unfinished, unsigned. But - his heartbeat increased noticeably. He knew who this was from. But unsent - ? Draco read it.

Dear Draco,

I've been sitting here all night, trying to think of what to say to you, either to explain myself or to apologize. I don't really think there's anything I even can say to make things any better, but I thought I could maybe just explain, or something. It's a lot of things, really. It's this whole war, the Prophecy and everything. Everyone expects me to be able to save them from Voldemort,

because if I don't, they're all screwed. And I don't know enough, I don't know what I'm doing yet. That's why I have to train so hard.

A couple of months ago, those two times in the Owlery - gods, I feel so horrible about those. I had no idea you were really gay, I was just hoping you were, I guess. I know I behaved like a total moron - just kissing you like that, out of the blue. I'm so sorry. And then leaving right after, especially the second time, when you wanted someone to stay with you. I really am sorry.

Also, I have a confession. I guess it doesn't really seem like it, since I've been acting like the hugest bastard in the world, but I've really liked you for a long time, probably almost a year now. I've known I was gay since our sixth year sometime, but it was only last summer that I realized that I really liked you.

I really wanted what happened tonight. I can't believe I was such a bastard to you after. I guess I just freaked myself out a bit - I'm trying so hard to be good here, wake up on time, follow the rules, not do anything stupid - and the very second week, I let this happen. I don't know whether I should feel more guilty or more happy, but mostly, I'm furious with myself. I am so sorry. You deserve better than that.

You probably hate me now. I probably would if I was in your position. I don't even know exactly how you feel about me, or whatever, but I

It stopped there. There was no more. Draco's eyes returned to the top and he read it again, three times. He didn't know how to feel. His heart was racing. He looked over the parchment at Hedwig, who had fixed her amber eyes sternly upon him. "You stole this," he said, with awe in his voice. "He wasn't going to send it, or even finish it, and you stole it and brought it to me. I can't believe you." He gave a shaky laugh, and Hedwig hopped up onto his knee.

Draco stroked her head. "He wasn't going to finish it, was he?"

A doleful hoot.

"I didn't think so."

The silence stretched out companionably. "I almost wish he knew I'd seen it," Draco mused. "Then maybe we could stop playing these stupid games."

Another hoot, and Hedwig stuck out her leg.

"I am *not* writing to him to tell him that," Draco said flatly. "Nice try, though. Look, if you're so keen to get us together, talk to him. I tried, and got myself completely rejected. I'm not doing that again."

A questioning hoot, and another nudge at the crumpled, unfinished letter. Draco sighed, looking at it. "Yeah, I like him, too," he said, wishing with all his might that he didn't. "I'm going to dream about last night - the first part, not the ending - for months. It was exactly what I wanted, minus the stupid git's nerves and uncertainty. But he's just not going to let it happen. He's got bigger fish to fry. Besides," Draco told Hedwig bitterly, "he's got to be the saviour of the world, after all. How could I hope that he'd spare me any of his time?"

Another doleful hoot. Hedwig flapped about the narrow interior of the tent. Draco watched, with wry amusement, her attempts to land on the slick, steeply-angled nylon side. "Don't, you'll rip it," he said. "I need this stupid tent - I have to live here for the next month and a half, or thereabouts. Did you want to go now?"

Hedwig flapped over to the opening, giving him an apologetic look. Draco got it - she couldn't be away too long, or Potter would wonder where she'd gone. Unless he thought she was hunting. Well, maybe she really did need to hunt. Draco let her out. "Hey," he said. "Thanks."

A hoot, and a friendly swipe of feathery, white wing across his face, and she was gone, silhouetted against the crescent moon.

* * *

Thursday was another heavy work-out day. Draco thought his arms were going to break on the hundredth push-up.

"Faster!" Hooch was barking at Macmillan, who was, admittedly, quite slow. "Malfoy, you finished? Another ten laps, then."

Draco suppressed his moan and pulled his hot face off his equally hot arms. His skin smelled of heat and salt, and his face was wet. He pulled himself to his feet and headed for the makeshift track. Longbottom was jogging disconsolately, face a bright, tomato red. He looked like he was going to pass out. As the shorter, ex-Gryffindor passed him, Draco said, "Longbottom. Drink some water, for Merlin's sake. You're going to get heatstroke and die out here."

Longbottom panted back, "Okay," and gasped his way off the track.

It was clear now. Draco returned to it wearily. He had, apparently, just the right body type to make him a natural sprinter, but he had not grown up addicted to physical exertion. Rather the opposite, really. *I know the plot of The Marriage of Figaro, but I've never run this much in my entire LIFE as I have this past week and a half*, Draco thought, shoving his hair off his forehead. He sighed and began to run.

Somewhere during the fourth lap, he noticed someone else on the track. Potter. Bloody, fucking great. Completely *ideal*, really. Draco increased his speed in order to stay ahead of Potter, who was also, apparently, a natural sprinter.

They circled like predators, each waiting for the other to make a mistake, some breach of the barrier between them. Draco watched him from the corner of his eye. He was incredibly hurt, he was *furious* with Potter, and he was… shit. He was in love with Potter. There was no way around it. No one else would ever do. It had to be Potter.

On the seventh lap, Draco decided to try something and see what happened. He increased his speed, and within half a lap, he had caught up to Potter. Potter looked distracted and tried running faster, but Draco matched his pace. Potter decided to ignore him, staring straight ahead. "You should learn not to leave your crap lying around," Draco said, panting.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Potter sounded irritated, even through his breathlessness.

Draco pulled the parchment out of his pocket and waved it, still running, at Potter. "I got an owl last night." He watched Potter's reaction.

Potter gasped and stumbled, almost falling, but regained his balance. "Hedwig!" he gasped. "Shit! I'm going to *kill* her!" He grabbed for the parchment, but Draco snatched it back, out of Potter's grasp.

"Why?" he snarled. "I'm glad she brought it - it just confirms what I suspected - you *do* like me; you're just too much of a coward to act on your feelings. I, at least, follow through on what I start." Draco had never suspected that Potter had had feelings for him all along, but there was no need for the git to know that.

"You fucker!" Potter panted. "We can't talk about this here!"

"Oh, and I'm supposed to believe that you'll agree to meet me later to talk about it?" Draco sneered, between gasps. His side had a stitch in it. One more lap. "That's rich, Potter. I remember the last time I tried getting you to talk to me - "

"I said I was sorry!"

"But you didn't send the apology, did you?" Draco pressed. "Therefore, I haven't gotten it."

"I sent you an owl before, back at school, and you ignored it! I just wasn't thinking, that night, and - "

"Tell me something," Draco said, panting, his voice jarred by the pounding of his trainers on the hard track, "are there *any* nights when you actually *do* think, Potter? Because Tuesday night wasn't one of them, either, was it?"

"Shut up about Tuesday!" Potter's face was flaming.

"You wanted it!"

"I fucking *know* I did! I just - can't do this kind of thing. Not now. Not here." Potter wiped his brow furiously.

Five thousand things tried to come out of Draco's mouth at once, and he had to concentrate on selecting the best, most urgent one to say. "Why? Because Shacklebolt and Dumbledore expect you to play the martyr while you're busy learning how to save their hides? Has it occurred to you that you might actually *die* during this war, Potter? Would you want your entire life to have been nothing but sacrifice for the greater good? Because I think that's bullshit."

Potter opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again, breathing heavily through his nose as they jogged. They had just started Draco's tenth lap. "I - Draco - "

"You don't even know, do you?" Draco said, mouth twisting in anger. "You can seek me out to play games with my mind - you don't even *care* about what *I* might be feeling about all of this - you're more important, because you've just got so much stuff to deal with right now. That's it, isn't it?"

They jogged several paces in silence before Potter managed to answer. "I just don't want to disappoint anyone," he said, sounding as though he knew that wasn't quite the right thing to say, but not sure what else to say and needing to make a response.

Almost at the starting point. "But I don't matter, do I?" Draco said bitterly.

"That's not what I - "

"No, that's not what you actually said, but that's what you mean. Fuck you, Potter. Because you've fucking disappointed *me*. I hate you." And with that, Draco jogged off the track and off the field, too. He was supposed to be done now, anyway. If Hooch didn't like it, she could go and fuck herself.

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The end of the week could not have come soon enough. There was another Quidditch game on

Saturday evening, but no one invited Draco. He stayed bitterly in his tent, heart bursting with envy and hard-done-by feelings, and played with Hedwig instead.

On Sunday evening, Granger came to visit him, of all things. Draco was sitting outside of his tent this time, looking at the stars. It was only eleven or so, but Draco missed his nights of prowling about the castle. Hedwig was there again, and she hooted as Granger approached, looking awkward. Draco looked up and silently watched her come.

"Hi," she said tentatively.

Draco gave her a cool nod. "Hello, Granger."

"Can I sit down?"

Draco shrugged. "I don't own the grass."

She gave a terse laugh and sat, cross-legged, a few feet away. "If you did, would you have let me sit down?"

Draco gave the ex-Gryffindor a critical glance. "I suppose so."

Granger actually smiled, seeming pleased by this. It was discomfiting. "Thanks," she said. She glanced toward Field Seven. "Why aren't you playing Quidditch right now?"

"No one invited me."

"You know you don't need an invitation," Granger said pointedly. Damn her, she knew.

"In my case, you do." He was curt, to the point.

"But you love playing."

"I know I do."

Granger fell silent, thinking. Dangerous, really. One never knew what she would come up with next with that freakishly powerful brain of hers. "He feels terrible, you know."

"Good."

She looked up, but Draco was staring fixedly at the sky. "He keeps mooning around, saying that you hate him."

"I do hate him."

"No, you don't," Granger said, sounding exasperated. "Don't give me that crap. That's the whole problem."

"What, the crap?"

"No! That you're both crazy about each other, and - "

"He is *not* crazy about me," Draco interrupted flatly, even as he wondered why he was even discussing this with Granger. Of all people. Was he that desperate for company? "If he actually gave a fuck about me, he'd have come and found me by now. He knows where I live."

"You know where he lives, too."

"I talked to him last time. The ball's in his court."

Granger sighed. "I know it is," she said at last. "I don't know what his problem is. Well, I do, I suppose. He really is starting to feel the pressure of what it will mean if he gets himself killed in this war. It would be the end of our kind, Draco. You know that by now."

Draco was quiet, too, and turned his gaze to his own constellation. It was bright; July was its month, as it was his. "That's too heavy a load to put on anyone."

"I know it is." Granger sounded sympathetic. "Trust me, he knows he's fucked up with you."

Draco rolled his eyes. "That's a mild understatement."

"I don't know if it's any comfort at all," Granger continued, as though he hadn't spoken, "but he really does care about you. He never mentioned it before this spring, exactly, but in retrospect, I can see that it's been there for a long time."

There was a moment of silence. Then - "No, it's not a comfort," Draco said tightly.

"I'm sorry."

"If he's not going to actually *do* anything about it, or just fucking *let* it happen, then it's not a comfort."

"I know," Granger said, more sympathetic than ever, and Draco kind of wanted to hit her.

In the distance, there was the sound of cheering. "Sounds like someone's got the Snitch, then," Granger said in a different tone of voice, gaze straying off in the direction of Field Seven.

"It's Harry," Draco said, uncomfortably aware that he'd just used Potter's first name. Damn it.

A curious look. "How do you know it wasn't Krum?"

"They never cheer that loudly for anyone else," Draco said quietly, looking straight ahead.

"It's pretty hard to beat Krum," Granger said dubiously.

"Trust me on this one. Besides, Krum's tired out. He's good at all the stuff he does, but kind of slow, and I don't think he has a lot of stamina."

Granger turned her narrowed gaze to him, scrutinizing. "You're just saying that because you beat him last week," she said shrewdly.

Draco shrugged. "Why aren't you watching?" he asked, just to get the topic off of himself.

Granger stiffened. "It's… personal," she said.

Draco smirked to himself. He'd been right. "Can't stand watching Krum score on Weasley, that it?"

Granger stood up quickly. Ignoring this, she said, "Just - I know it's hard, but - just try to remember that he really does care about you. He's just doing the only thing he knows how."

"Well, he fucking sucks at it," Draco said rudely, getting to his feet, too. "Thanks for the chat, Granger." He turned toward his tent.

She just nodded, sighing defeatedly. "Good night."

"Night."

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Chapter: 9

Chapter 9: Defensive Transfiguration

Monday morning started too early. There were just no two ways about it. Draco opened his eyes and stared at his hands, which were far too close to his face to focus on properly. He blinked. It was one of those mornings when he'd woken abruptly, and very clearly. He knew immediately that it was Monday morning, time to get up for another hot day in the sun, that his group would be changing this morning, that he'd spoken (willingly, even) to Granger the night before, and that he was horny as hell.

It was six-thirty in the morning. Draco knew that, because he always timed his wand to wake him then. Training started at seven. Breakfast was on right now, but hardly anyone went. It was just too early. If he made it quick, he would still have time to get dressed and get to Field Fourteen on time. If he ran. Draco wavered for a moment, then decided he didn't care if he *was* late. He reached down into his sleeping bag and began to stroke himself. His morning wood could hardly have been harder than it already was. Draco bit his lip and tried not to think about Potter, but the images kept coming into his mind - of Potter's face, above or beneath his, contorted in desire, the way he'd felt in Draco's hands, the way his hands had felt on Draco's - "Shit!" Draco panted, aloud, and came messily into his own hands.

He lay still, breathing heavily. It had almost been a week ago. A week. Fuck. Draco reached for his wand and cleaned himself and his sleeping bag both. It was time to get going. But at least one thing today had gone, more or less, anyway, the way it was supposed to.

Field Fourteen was a long way away. Draco chose a brisk pace and got there on time. Granger was there. Great. Still. Anything was an improvement on -

"Don't tell me Potter's overslept again," Shacklebolt said to McGonagall, frowning at her list on the seemingly ubiquitous clipboard.

"He'd better not," McGonagall said tightly. "He's got quite enough demerits to be going on with."

Granger shifted nervously and looked at Draco, who was staring morosely at the withering grass. Fantastic. Another week with the git. How bloody perfect. He sighed, and knew that Granger heard it.

Eventually, they were all there, even bloody Potter, who was rubbing at his eyes tiredly, but had actually managed to arrive on time. The other three were Boot and the Weasley twins. A whole *raft* of ex-Gryffindors. Perfect. Just perfect. Draco could see that this was shaping up to be just a splendid week already.

They were working in groups of three today. Because the twins refused to split up, Draco ended up being stuck with them, while Boot went with Potter and Granger. It was Defensive Transfiguration today, which sounded interesting enough. They got their assignments (Transfiguring weapons into things which could not inflict harm) and got to work.

Draco turned slightly toward the Weasleys (he had never bothered learning to tell them apart, and still couldn't) and waited. They glanced at each other, as they had when McGonagall had read the groups out. "So," one of them said. "I bet you can't tell us apart yet. I'm Fred, he's George."

Draco didn't know whether they were having them on or not, so he just nodded aloofly. "If you say so."

"We do," the other inserted dryly. "There are differences. Honest. See if you can work them out by lunch. So. What do you two want to start with?"

McGonagall had suggested starting small - stones into feathers, things of that nature. Draco shrugged. "Whatever. It doesn't matter to me."

The other twin (George?) looked thoughtful. "Well," he said, "between the three of us, I'd say we're all pretty clever. Let's start with stones, but then let's get moving to the big stuff. That'll be more interesting, anyway."

"Okay," his brother (Fred?) said. "Let's start with them on the ground, and then throw them at each other."

Despite himself, Draco's interest was snagged. "Okay," he said. "I guess we should find some rocks, then."

"Good plan. See, George, I told you he wasn't so bad," Fred (?) said jokingly. Perhaps it was because he'd caught the Snitch last week. The three of them fanned out and began forming a veritable hill of small stones.

It was interesting work, and actually rather fun. Some of the heaviness left Draco for awhile as he hurled missiles of rock at whichever twin, only to have them turned into feathers, butterflies, snowflakes, and any number of other silly things. They were vastly cooler than the Weasel, and Draco was again pleased that the latter wasn't in his group this week. By mid-morning, they'd graduated themselves (quite proudly, too) to firebombs, which became pillows, doves, even socks, and on to spears and swords, which became streamers, generally, except for in one case when Fred (?) produced, of all things, a haddock. Despite himself, Draco found that he was

enjoying their company. There was an easy sort of carefree know-how behind everything they did, a serious twist of arrogance to rival any Slytherin, and even though they positively smacked of Gryffindor, were generally less over-wrought than your average Gryffindor. And they were funny, too. Draco found himself thinking, during a moment forgetfulness, that Potter was friends with them, and could understand why, now.

Fred wiped his brow. Draco was fairly certain it was Fred; there was a little crease by his mouth when he talked that the other twin didn't have. And George had slightly gentler facial expressions; he seemed the slightly-quieter of the two. Not that that was saying much. "Oi!" Fred called. "What's the time?"

Draco cast a *tempus* and said, "Nearly twelve."

"Good, I'm starving," the other twin replied.

"You're always starving, you git."

"Well, so are you!"

"Touche," Fred admitted. "What about you, Malfoy? Hungry?"

He was, in fact. Draco shrugged. "A bit."

"Okay, let's do one more round of swords, and then we'll be done."

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Draco ended up walking to the eating lodge with the twins, sort of trailing along half behind them, half with them - but not so close that they necessarily needed to think that he was tagging along, especially if he was unwanted. He didn't have a problem with eating by himself, but he resented that he'd had little choice about the matter. And the twins had appeared genuinely friendly.

"… don't you think, Malfoy?"

Draco's mind snapped back into the present. George was addressing him, apparently appealing to him for support. "Sorry, what?" he said.

"Fred's haddock - that was a waste of time, wasn't it?"

Draco hesitated. "Well, it was funny," he said. "Probably not much use in battle, though - unless you Transfigure the spear into a flying haddock with teeth and shit."

Fred laughed. "See, George?" he crowed. "I'll work on the teeth. And shit."

"But we said we weren't going to waste time any more," his brother argued. "If McGonagall had seen that, she'd have gone ballistic. You know she would."

"Fine, fine," Fred conceded, with a mock-sigh. "No more haddock." He caught Draco's eye behind his twin and mouthed, "Next time I'll do cod."

Draco felt a reluctant smile tugging at the corners of his lips. By the time they'd reached the eating lodge, it seemed safe to assume that he could sit with them. Unless they sat by Potter or something. They didn't, though; Potter's table was already full. The twins picked a mostly-empty one and the conversation resumed unbroken.

Sometime toward the end of lunch, a shadow fell across it. Draco looked up swiftly. It wasn't - no, it wasn't. It was Dumbledore. "Mr. Malfoy," he said pleasantly. "Are you finished? I require a few moments of your time."

Draco's plate was empty. "Certainly, sir," he said, getting quickly to his feet.

The twins exchanged a look, then said, "See you later, Malfoy."

"Yeah. See you." Draco slipped around the table and followed Dumbledore out of the tent. He could feel the green eyes following them.

Outside, Snape, of all people, stood in the shade of one of the few trees, looking somehow sullen about the heat. "Malfoy," he said tonelessly, by way of greeting.

"Professor," Draco said, inclining his head. "What brings you here?"

In answer, Snape's brows lifted slightly. "You, as it happens." He looked at Dumbledore. "Where can we talk in private?"

"Come to my tent," Dumbledore invited. "Everyone else is at lunch."

Without a word, Draco followed them, wondering what was going on. Once they'd arrived at the notably larger tent, Dumbledore left them, saying, "Professor Snape will see to everything here, Mr. Malfoy. You may rejoin your team whenever your meeting is over."

"Yes, sir."

When the tent flap dropped closed, Snape turned to Draco. "I will not keep you long," he said. "There are a few matters we need to discuss. First." He reached into a robe pocket and withdrew two small, silver keys. He held one up. "Do you recognize this?"

Draco studied it. "It looks like a Gringotts vault key," he said.

"Correct. It belonged to your parents. It now belongs to me."

"Wh - " Draco began, but Snape cut him off.

"The vault has been emptied," he said. "The contents have been re-deposited into a vault under your name alone, accessible by you or myself only. And, of course, a Gringotts employee. This is yours." He held out the second key. "Keep it safe. The only other key is locked in my own vault, which is accessible only by my fingerprint."

He fell silent. Draco turned the key over in his hands. "How did you do it?" he asked quietly.

"Foolish question," Snape said dismissively.

"Do you know where my parents are?"

Snape hesitated, then said, "No."

Draco looked up, angry. "If you know, tell me, damn it!"

Snape's tone grew frosty. "I assure you that I do not know. I wish that I did. They are on the run, presumed by the Ministry and the Order to be with the Dark Lord."

Draco absorbed this, and nodded. The spurt of fury died down again. He looked at the key. "How much is in there?"

Snape's lip twisted. "Enough that your father will be most displeased to find it missing," he said. "Enough to fit you for independent life. You know, of course, that you will receive no further financial support from your father."

"Of course I know that!" Draco snapped. "I know what it means to be disowned, thank you very much."

Snape did not flinch. "Good," he said. "You need to." He leaned forward slightly. "There is a price on your head, Draco."

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Scratch at the tent flap, almost too soft to be heard. As if whoever had scratched hadn't really been sure they wanted to.

"What?" Draco asked tiredly, hardly raising his voice.

Pause. "It's me," Potter said awkwardly, obviously unsure as to how to identify himself. Odd, that he'd resorted to something even *less* formal in the attempt.

Draco paused, himself. "What do you want?"

"Can I talk to you?"

Draco gave a terse laugh. "I don't know, Potter. *Can* you? Or will you scare yourself and run away again?"

He'd expected a retort, but it wasn't what he got. "Please, Draco," Potter said, almost pleading. "I just want to talk to you. You don't have to stay for long."

"What?! It's you that keeps it from going long in the first place, you stupid twat." Draco rolled his eyes elaborately.

Pause. "Are you going to come out or not?" Potter asked stiffly.

Draco sighed. "For a few minutes, I guess," he said grudgingly. Damn his heart for racing. He unzipped the tent flap and exited. The cool, night air was pleasant on his face after the stuffiness of the tent. He stood up and regarded Potter as coolly as possible, arms crossed over his chest.

While standing, there should be a way to cross one's arms, or some equivalent, over one's legs, too, Draco thought, swallowing. Potter was wearing a tight black t-shirt and jeans and had his own arms wrapped around himself against the cold. Draco looked at Potter's sinewy forearms and said, "What?"

"Let's walk," Potter said brusquely, and started walking quickly away.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Just one of the fields, I guess." Potter's arms were still hugging himself tightly. Was he that cold? *Or that afraid that he'd accidentally touch Draco?*

After a bit, Potter said abruptly, "You were right. I owe you an apology. I wanted to offer it now,

see if you'd accept it."

"What are you apologizing for?" Draco kept his voice even.

"For leading you on, basically. For all my jerky behaviour. For - uh - starting something that I can't finish. I'm sorry." Potter's voice stayed curt throughout, faltering only slightly toward the end.

Draco felt his chest tightening. *That's not what he's supposed to be saying.* He said nothing.

Potter glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "I just - I don't know if you believed me, in that letter, but it's just that I - well, I'm the Boy Who Lived, like it or not, and I just really have to not fuck this up. The war, I mean."

"You're their little puppet," Draco returned, more harshly than he'd intended. "The little figurehead they all get to stuff their knowledge and talents into, channelling through you to get to Voldemort. It's sick. You should be allowed to have a life of your own."

"Maybe, but I don't," Potter argued. "Honestly. It's not their fault, either. Nobody wanted it this way, not even Voldemort."

It was true, and there was nothing Draco could say to refute it. Instead, disappointment still burning in his chest, he said, "What makes you so sure that a relationship would distract you so badly?"

Potter gave him an irritated glance. "Don't be daft. Of course it would distract me. Don't try to talk me out of this, Draco. I can't. I just can't. But I wanted to ask you if we could be friends. I - I hate seeing you by yourself all the time. I've tried so hard to tell myself I didn't like you at all, in any way, but it's a lie. I do. I want to be with you. But I can't, so I'm asking if we can be friends instead."

Friends. The word sat heavily upon Draco's shoulders and left a bitter taste in his mouth. "Friends," he repeated aloud, dubiously.

"Yeah," Potter said, sounding encouraged. "You know - we could hang out sometimes, and - and

you could play Quidditch with the rest of us, and hang out with us on the weekends. What do you think?"

He sounded almost pitifully eager, Draco thought, with something between affection and irritation. The Quidditch bit was definitely a lure, and Potter knew it. Knew Draco would know it, too. They walked another furlong or so before Draco finally responded. "Fine. But only if I play on the opposite team from you."

"Fine," Potter agreed quickly, without asking why. Which was good; Draco didn't want to explain. Another short silence ensued, and then Potter said, "We were thinking of playing on Wednesdays and Sundays. We're not supposed to play more than twice a week."

"Okay." Another time, Draco would have snorted and said it was a stupid, unnecessary rule, but it was both irrelevant and, obnoxiously, accurate. They were tired enough with just the training every day, never mind extra physical exertion for fun.

"So - Wednesday, then?" Potter asked hesitantly.

Draco wondered briefly whether Granger had talked to him or not. Probably. "Fine. When do you start?"

"I can - "

"Just give me a time," Draco interrupted, voice cool. "There's not need for you to go out of your way on my account."

Potter struggled with this for a moment, then regained his cool and said, "Fine. Eight o'clock."

They walked back toward the tents in silence.

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Quidditch on Wednesday night was amazing. It had made the day go by faster, too, knowing that he would play that night. Potter was trying to divide the teams as equally as possible each time. It

wasn't always the same people; they were just pick-up games and whoever wanted to, came. That night, Team One consisted of Potter (Seeker), Krum (Beater), Macmillan (Beater), Weasley (Keeper), Bones, Longbottom and Boot (Chasers). Team Two had been Draco (Seeker), Anthony Goldstein (a Ravenclaw Draco hardly knew at all, who played Beater), Finch-Fletchley (Beater), Smith (Keeper), the Patil twins and Finnigan (Chasers). Potter had caught the Snitch, but it had been close. A Bludger had come smashing toward Draco right as he'd been about to catch it, and he'd had to duck out of its way. Meanwhile, Potter swooped in from out of nowhere and caught the damned thing.

Afterward, Draco had walked away, listening enviously to Potter and the Weasel's laughter floating through the clear night as they struggled to recapture the Bludgers.

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Friday had brought a bit of a twist. Despite Potter's request, Draco had not taken to sitting with him and his friends during meals - he now routinely sat with the Weasley twins, with whom he was continually partnered throughout the week. He did not want to be friends with Potter. He wanted so much more that it choked him to think of it all, and embarrassed him slightly. What a fool. Of all the people to fall for, he had to go and choose the unwilling saviour of the world. Brilliant fucking choice.

That morning, they were doing more with Defensive Transfiguration, only they were Transfiguring weapons they'd produced themselves as well as those coming at them. They were working all together now, all six of them. Boot's weapons were generally quite cruel in their intention; Granger's were merely clever. Potter's were typical, sometimes creative. The Weasleys were entirely unpredictable - Draco even thought he saw Fred's fanged haddock at one point, hissing through the air toward his twin's throat before it was reduced to a puff of smoke.

It got quite heated, each determined to be the last man (or woman, in Granger's case) standing. Draco was as determined as the rest. Just then, a combination of missiles flew toward him - a spear from George, a flaming arrow from Granger, and a rather huge mace from Boot. Draco had a split-second of panic, trying to determine which to target first - the arrow was closest and coming the faster, so he Transfigured it into a thin stream of water. The spear became a trail of smoke, and the mace -

- was about to smash his face in, when it suddenly and unaccountably became a very large snowball, which spattered his face. Reeling in shock - he'd almost just done it there, gone and lost his life right in the middle of *training* camp because of his own carelessness, except that someone else had Transfigured the mace for him. Draco made a sound somewhere between a

choke and a gasp, staggering backward, and swiped the cold snow off his face.

Potter was standing across the short space from him, his face clearly horrified. Wand gripped tightly in his right hand, aimed at him. A hot, burning sensation began in Draco's chest and worked its way up to his face. Fucking hells, Potter had just saved his life, damn him. Proving, once again, that he was the better wizard. McGonagall could be heard, dimly, somewhere behind the chaos in Draco's head at the moment, shouting at Boot, Granger and George for all aiming at him at the same time. Boot was looking stricken and going on about how he hadn't realized, hadn't meant it - Draco tuned it out, staring at the ground. He was humiliated.

The snow was melting. A little of it might have been refreshing; it was bloody hot. But a snowball the size of Boot's mace was rather a lot of it. He was wet and uncomfortable in so many ways. McGonagall was addressing him now. Draco made himself look up at her.

"Are you alright?" she fussed, coming over. "You look like you've had quite a shock."

"I'm fine," Draco said stiffly. "Just fine."

"Perhaps we had better quit a little early," she said sharply, clearly not buying this for a second. "It's only half an hour until dinner anyway. Why don't you all go and have a bit of a rest? It's hot."

Slowly, they all began to wander off, all but Potter, at any rate. McGonagall was gone, and Granger had left, too. The twins were walking quickly away, talking quietly and urgently to one another. Boot had left Field Fourteen alone, in disgrace. Draco had no idea what Potter wanted, lingering like that, but he knew for a fact that he did *not* want to hear it.

Potter came over slowly, as though approaching a wild horse. No, strike that. As though *he* was the wild horse who was afraid of getting too close. Yes, that most certainly fit. Draco looked at him at last, when it became patently unavoidable. "What?" he snapped.

"Draco - I - your face, there - " Potter stopped, looking even more stricken than Boot had, before.

Like he actually cared. Draco was suddenly warm again, sensations returning and all blooming into a magnificent temper. "Fuck you!" he bit out. "I don't need you cleaning up after my

mistakes!"

"I wasn't - "

"Yes you were! I can defend myself!" Draco almost held his breath, knowing *exactly* what Potter was going to say.

Potter opened his mouth to say it, then forced the comment down again. Remarkable self-restraint, really. "I know you can," he said quietly. "But I didn't like seeing it - coming so close to you, is all."

Draco had no response for this. Besides turning around and walking away, the only other option was to grab Potter and crash their mouths together, demanding, until Potter gave *in*, damn it, and - no. Draco drew a deep, shuddering breath. He turned around and walked away.

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He didn't see Potter in close quarters again until Sunday at dinner. He knew there was a Quidditch game that night, and he wanted to play more than anything. It was the only respite in this strange, private universe of physical torture. Potter had been extremely aloof the day before, avoiding him at every possible juncture. On Friday at supper, he had come in, gotten food and left again with it. Saturday night, Hedwig had come to visit. Empty-beaked, but it had been nice to see her again, all the same. Draco wondered how Potter had been to her after the affair with the letter - he'd almost wondered if Potter would lock her up at nights after this, but apparently this was not the case.

He was sitting beside George Weasley at the end of the table. George turned to him. "Coming out to play tonight?"

Draco glanced over at Potter, who was staring morosely into his glass of pumpkin juice while the Weasel and Granger prattled on about whatever. "Yeah. I guess so."

"Good," George said, with a rare, normal smile.

Out on Field Seven, Potter simply pretended he couldn't see Draco.

And Draco pretended right back, but gods, it hurt. Once, during the game, they had ended up having to swerve around one another, and Potter's bare arm (it had been Team One's turn to play shirtless) had brushed Draco's hand. Draco had jerked away; the touch had almost felt like a burn. Hot, not warm. Truth be told, he'd nearly fallen off his broom, but no one had seen.

It didn't change the fact that he knew. He lay awake a long time that night, eyes open and burning.

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Chapter: 10

Chapter 10: After the Quidditch Game

Monday morning again. Gods, how he hated Mondays. Draco woke up slightly more slowly than usual, and pondered his fate. Five hours of sleep. Not enough, really. Surprising that he hadn't overslept, in fact - he tended to, if he'd gotten less than six hours. Draco conjured a cup of coffee and sipped it, still in bed, and considered his wardrobe choices for the day.

They were, in fact, depressingly limited. The trainees were all required to wear the variously-coloured Dumbledore's Army t-shirts during the day, with whatever they wanted on the bottom (no shorts). Draco had three black ones, a green one, and two blue ones. What had been available, basically. He was told that no one got six of the same colour. Six was all they got. Potter seemed to have them in red, black, and green. He usually wore the red one. Or one of them. Whatever. Draco swallowed a too-large sip of coffee that burned his throat rather painfully on the way down. He was *not* going to think about that stupid, useless git. Friends. What was he thinking? Well, at least he appeared to be just as angry with Draco now, since their exchange on Friday, as Draco was with him.

Although anger really didn't even cover it. Fury, even, was slightly inadequate. Draco swallowed the last of the coffee, wincing, and forced himself out of the bedroll, which had become surprisingly comfortable under circumstances of extreme fatigue. The black shirt it was. It was a black sort of a day. He pulled on his well-worn, dark denim jeans, shoved his feet into trainers, grabbed his wand and headed out.

Field Ten this week, at least for first-thing. Draco's heart sank. He'd forgotten it was Moody and Shacklebolt again. Back to duelling. He glanced warily around to see who his groupmates were this week. And bit back a sigh. Granger and Weasley were *both* there. So far, no Potter, but that could change - about ten minutes past starting time, say, Draco thought nastily. Viktor Krum was there again, standing apart, eyes half-closed. Padma Patil, he thought, was sitting on the ground, chatting with Zacharias Smith. With a jolt, Draco realized that they were all there. Six of them. No Potter.

No Potter.

He'd expected to be relieved. Not this - this heaviness, sitting on his chest like a stone he didn't have the strength to push off. And this cold, tightness - surely this wasn't because he was *that* dependent on seeing Potter all the time, every day, Draco thought, with a touch of desperation. *Surely I'm not* that *far gone*. Within seconds, a cloud of depression had settled around his shoulders, and Draco knew it would stay for the week. *If Potter's not even in my group, how can we possibly* - stop. Curtail thought. He was just going to have to accept that no resolution was going to happen. No matter how much he wanted it.

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By Wednesday, Draco was thoroughly sick and tired of having the Weasel and Granger obviously talking about him, whispering and shooting him little looks every so often - suspicious, on Weasley's part, and concerned on Granger's. The latter was certainly more obnoxious.

Draco stalked off the field for lunch, hoping that the Weasley twins would be there, and that they weren't already sitting with Potter.

They weren't. "Draco!" George called, spotting him. Draco did a quick check. No Potter. He smiled and went over.

"How's it going?" he asked them both.

They immediately started talking about what they'd gotten up to that day, and their banter (thankfully) took Draco's mind off everything else, for a bit. It was a relief. The twins went on and on for a bit, until Fred got bored of the subject. "Quidditch tonight, eh?" he said brightly,

obviously excited.

Draco stared into his empty plate for a moment, feeling his insides twist. Quidditch meant Potter. He was conversely even more excited than Fred, and a whole lot less, too. Possibly the correct name for the feeling was dread. He hadn't even seen Potter, save across large, crowded places such as this and variously fields, while the training groups changed locations, since Sunday night at the last Quidditch game. The twins were still waiting for him to respond, though. Draco took a deep breath, and forced a smile. "Yeah," he said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

George glanced over at the next table, where Viktor Krum was sitting with the Patil twins. "Heard Krum's going to play tonight," he said.

Another twist. Potter was not likely to accommodate him this time, which meant that Draco would probably have to play some position he didn't, thereby making a fool of himself. It wasn't likely that Krum would accept being still in an unfamiliar position, either. "Really?" Draco asked, the word sounding strained.

"Yeah, but Harry's going to make him Keep, don't worry," Fred said, laughing.

"Did Krum actually agree to that?" George asked, curiously.

"I dunno. Guess we'll see tonight, won't we?" Fred looked up suddenly. "Shite, look at the time! I wanted to stop by my tent before the afternoon. I'll see you on the field, Georgie. Where are we, One?"

"Yep. Spellwork review," George said, making a face. "See you there."

"See you, Malfoy."

"Bye," Draco responded automatically. One table over, Potter was turning his fork over and over again in his hands, seemingly unaware of the conversation which Granger and the Weasel were holding around him, full-stream.

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"Team One," Potter read, eyes never once skating over Draco, "will be: Chasers: Ron Weasley, Zacharias Smith, and Anthony Goldstein; Beaters: Ernie Macmillan and Susan Bones; Keeper: Viktor Krum; Seeker: myself. We're shirts tonight. Team Two will be: Chasers: Neville Longbottom, and Fred and George Weasley; Beaters: Parvati and Padma Patil; Keeper: Terry Boot; Seeker: uh, Draco Malfoy."

Draco caught the hesitation, if no one else had. *So he can't even bring himself to say my name now, he hates me so much. Fucking* perfect. *I hate my life.* However, Quidditch was still Quidditch, and he was still Seeking. And he would beat Potter if his life depended on it.

He stripped off his shirt and tossed it toward the sidelines, near the Hooch's case for the Quidditch ball set, and grabbed his Firebolt. The game began. It was interesting, how Potter kept changing some people, at least, from their traditional positions. It was alright for some, he supposed, but Draco had never particularly cared to try any of the other ones. He had always just been interested in Seeking. Fred and George's laughter could be heard, as they tossed the Quaffle back and forth, experimentally, early in the game. They were certainly harder to tell apart in the air, at a distance, and shirtless, but Draco thought he knew Fred's laugh by now - it was louder than George's, and happened more frequently, if only slightly. George scored then, and the rest of Team Two cheered. One of the Patil twins (who had stripped down to tank tops, at least) shrieked as a Bludger swerved at her - she only *just* deflected it with the heavy bat before it knocked her off her broom. Draco's eyes scanned for Potter, who was simply circling, watching, waiting.

Draco put on a burst of speed that put him up at Potter's level, though on the other side of the pitch, eyes narrowed even as they focused, scanning for any sign of the flickering Snitch. Potter caught sight of him; he could see the ex-Gryffindor stiffen. Draco shivered and began to circle, keeping his wary distance from Potter.

The Weasel scored then, and Boot cursed. Draco glanced at Potter again, checking to see whether the other had seen anything yet. But Potter was sitting back on his broom, hands on narrow hips, watching the Weasel with a fond smile on his face. Probably still proud that the stupid wanker hadn't yet made a complete fool of himself and the rest of his team, Potter included, Draco thought. But Potter's face - there was a softer expression there than what he normally had; his face was relaxed, open, friendly. Draco felt something within him give a different sort of twist, a keening yearning that he quickly tried to shove down. *I hate the bastard, and he hates me, too.* He knew it was a lie. Well, not about Potter hating him, perhaps.

Draco increased his speed suddenly, as though it would help him get rid of his thoughts, leave them behind, above everything else. No such luck, though. *I love the stupid bastard. What the fuck am I supposed to do with that?*

About forty-five minutes later, Draco caught the Snitch, in a burst of triumphant speed that almost managed to fill the cold, aching void in his chest. The Snitch struggled valiantly in his fingers, but Draco held on to it fiercely. It was the first time he'd ever won against Potter, Seeker to Seeker, and he didn't mean to forget it quickly.

* * *

"Great game, everyone!" Potter called, though somewhat less-enthusiastically than usual. He didn't ask for anyone to help him recall the playing balls this time, though. Draco had walked off the field airily, still quite pleased with himself, when he realized that he'd forgotten his shirt.

He swore, explained to the twins, then turned back to get it.

Draco approached Field Seven with trepidation, cursing his heart for racing the way it was. Potter was still there, surveying the skies. Looking for - what? Just then, Draco realized that he still had the Snitch (Krum had taken to leaving it in Hooch's case with the rest of the set) clutched in his right hand. He also spotted his shirt, a dark bundle not ten feet from Potter. Draco sighed. He was going to have to talk to Potter, if only to explain his presence and return the Snitch, lest Krum think he was trying to steal it.

As though sensing his presence, Potter turned suddenly, though Draco hadn't made any noise. Potter froze. "What are you doing here?" he asked tightly.

Oh, how he longed to strangle the git! Draco made himself be calm. "I forgot a couple of things," he said, in a would-be casual tone. "My shirt, for one." He advanced. "And the Snitch, actually."

Potter's expression changed to one of relief. "Oh, *you* have it," he said. "I couldn't find it anywhere, and I was worried that Krum would think I'd stolen it."

Draco deliberately went to his shirt first, and pulled it on - it was chilly - even though he knew damned well that it would have been easier to do if he'd relinquished the Snitch first. Let Potter wait, damn him.

There was a small storage shed which Hooch had put up for them to leave their brooms in, and Potter glanced at it, making sure it was open. How had Draco managed to put his broom away without remembering to give the Snitch back to someone? Perhaps it had been the giddiness of his unexpected win. Either way. Draco walked very coolly, very purposefully over to Potter and held out his fist, the Snitch's wings still beating feebly against it. "Here. Sorry."

Potter took it. His fingers were so warm, and he used both hands to cup around Draco's, making sure the Snitch didn't escape during the transfer. "Thanks," he said, not meeting Draco's eyes. He stooped quickly to put it away. Draco found that he couldn't move, couldn't make himself turn away, even though he had nothing more to do or say here. He was staring at Potter, transfixed.

Again, Potter seemed to sense it, and he glanced up uncertainly. "What?" he asked, voice belying his insecurity.

"I - nothing," Draco said, abruptly closing his mouth. Horrified that he'd even *thought* of saying something, there.

Potter stood up very quickly, suddenly angry. "Don't - fucking - *do* this to me!" he shouted, and shoved Draco up against the side of the small shed.

Draco's arms were pinned above his head, palms against Potter's warmer ones. Potter's anger-clouded face was about a foot away from his. "I'm not doing anything," he managed to say, heart racing faster than ever. *He's going to kill me yet. I'm going into fucking cardiac arrest here.*

"You're *tormenting* me!" Potter burst out. "I *told* you, I can't *do* this! But every time I even *look* at you, it's still there, and it's - I can't - I think about it all the time, and I can *see* you thinking about it, and I just - can't - *do* it!"

Draco stared into the beautiful, twisted features so close to his, into Potter's desperate eyes, and couldn't find the rationale to even argue. All coherent thoughts had fled, along with his need to appear dignified, if nothing else. "Harry, *please*," he ground out. He was begging. He knew he was, but he didn't care.

Potter's breath was hitting his lips, and for a long moment, they just stared at each other, both breathing too quickly. Then Potter lunged forward and crushed his mouth against Draco's. His memories later were fairly hazy, but somehow, Draco managed to slide his hands out from beneath Potter's in order to wrap his arms around Potter, tongues pushing against each other's

hard, and Potter's arms so tight Draco almost feared for his ribcage - or would have, if he could have made himself care about something other than the fact that Potter was kissing him again, and willingly. Forcefully. Draco felt like he was drowning. They were as close as two fully-clothed people could be, and he didn't want to ever be further apart again, in any respect.

They parted, gasping. "Are you happy now?" Potter demanded hoarsely.

Just say yes, Draco's brain commanded. *Say yes. Take what you can get.* But the rest of his mind answered back, stronger. *I can't.* "No," he said, with painful honesty. He brought his hands up to cup Potter's face, thumbs stroking over the ex-Gryffindor's cheekbones. "I won't be happy until every inch of you is mine," he murmured, eyes half-closed, the intensity of his emotion nearly choking him. "I can't breathe without you. I'm in love with you."

Potter's face took on a look of panic. "Shit," he said weakly, right before bringing their mouths together again.

But it was different this time - less needy and forceful. Gentler, more give and take, rather than just demanding. Draco's hands were still on Potter's face, caressing it, and Potter's hands were gripping his back. When they parted for air this time, Potter's eyes were slightly moist. "I'm tired of not having you," he said, sounding defeated. "I love you, too."

Draco's heart leapt into his throat, and for a moment, he was afraid to attempt speech, lest he embarrass himself. But he felt as though the weight of the globe had been lifted from his shoulders. "You do?"

Potter was nodding, reaching one hand up to thread fingers into Draco's hair. "I do," he confirmed quietly.

"Then have me, damn it!"

Potter gave a shaky laugh, and, after a slight pause, said, "Okay."

They kissed again, and it was comfortable this time, and yet more passionate than had been even a moment ago. Dignity be damned, Draco thought hazily. He wanted this to go on forever. His body had other thoughts, though, some of which were becoming increasingly demanding. Potter's tongue on his just felt so *good* - how was it possible for it to feel that good? Draco's jeans

tightened. Potter pressed into him, shuddering with desire, and he pulled his mouth off Draco's. "Can I - ?"

Draco gave a soft laugh. "*Fuck*, yes!"

Potter laughed, too, and reached for the button of Draco's jeans. Fumbling fingers, interrupting kisses, and needy bodies confused things for a few minutes, but they eventually got everything sorted out, and Draco was pushing himself in Potter's firm, warm grip. His own hand was closing around Potter's hard cock, and then they were kissing again. It was perfect, beautiful, and exactly what Draco wanted. He pulled his face back for a moment, just long enough to murmur, "Don't you *dare* fuck this up this time, Potter."

"I won't. I promise." Potter moved to kiss him again, then stopped, lips an inch from Draco's. "You called me Harry before."

Draco recalled that he had, in fact. "So?"

"Do it again."

"Harry," Draco said, experimentally, keeping his voice low.

Potter smiled, closed his eyes, and brought their mouths together again.

* * *

It might have been half an hour later, or it could have been hours - Draco had lost all sense of time, when he realized that his feet were going numb from having stood in the same position, more or less, for so long. It must have been late. Leaving his fingers were there were in Potter's hair, he pulled back. "Harry?"

"Mmm?" Potter looked blissfully snogged, lips swollen crimson, eyes still closed.

"I think it's probably getting late."

"So?"

His eyes were still closed. Draco shook his head, an affectionate smile playing about his lips. "So, training tomorrow, remember?"

Potter opened his eyes, and Draco hoped rather fervently that he hadn't just killed the mood. "Right," Potter said, with a sigh. "Better get to bed, then."

Draco hesitated for a moment. "Come to my tent."

Hesitation. Then, "Okay," Potter said simply.

They stopped to snog once or twice on the way there, but otherwise, made it without incident. Draco ushered Potter quickly into his tent, glancing around to make sure that no one had seen, then climbed in after him, sealing it behind them. Potter had already doubled the size of Draco's bedroll. He turned around to face Draco, standing in the tallest bit of the tent - which meant that Draco had to crouch stupidly. They both smiled, somewhat awkwardly, and Draco knelt instead. Potter followed his lead. "So," Potter said, trailing off with slight uncertainty. Wondering.

Draco realized that there was a rather large fill-in-the-gap here, and that they were on his turf. "What time is it?" he asked, stalling for time, although he really did want to know.

Potter cast a *tempus*. "Just after midnight."

Better not to rush things, anyway. "Should we - just go to sleep, then?" Draco asked carefully, not wanting Potter to think that, now that he'd given in to the temptation, he'd never get enough sleep again, or be able to learn as well as he had been, or whatever his Gryffindor guilt complex was likely to suggest.

"Okay," Potter said, after a slight pause, sounding - carefully - neither relieved, nor disappointed. He stripped off his shirt and tossed it toward one of Draco's carefully-folded clothing piles. Draco followed his lead. When they'd reached the boxer point, Draco gave him a quick, lascivious look and said, "I always sleep nude."

Potter laughed, a bit louder than usual, perhaps, but maybe he was nervous. "I do, too, actually," he said. "Here, at least. It gets so hot sometimes."

Draco smiled, nicely, and said, "Yeah, it does." He shed his boxers and got gracefully into bed. It was a little soon for full-on nudity, perhaps, but had their relationship happened on schedule, then it wouldn't have been an issue, he figured. Potter unselfconsciously copied his movements and joined him. Draco slid over and wrapped his arm around Potter's warm frame. "Too hot?" he asked, checking.

Potter relaxed against him fully. "No," he said. "Perfect. No, wait." He turned onto his back, and rearranged them so that Draco's head was on his chest. "*This* is perfect," he amended. "This is how I always imagined it."

"You imagined it?" Draco asked, mouthing a kiss over one of Potter's nipples.

Potter shivered, and wound his fingers into Draco's hair. "All the time," he said softly.

Draco smiled. "Good."

* * *

Miraculously, they didn't oversleep. They both got up, sorted out their clothing and dressed quickly. Potter knew the same showering spell as Draco did. Draco's mind cast a brief, longing thought toward showers where people could actually shower without getting dirtier, and having one with Potter, but pushed the thought from his mind. Later, sometime. If they both came through this. Right now, Draco was still so elated with the events of last night that he knew he would have to mind his thoughts today, lest he be caught grinning for no good reason in the middle of a lesson. Perish the thought.

There had been no awkward morning-after, either. They'd awoken to Draco's wand beeping. He'd rolled off Potter's chest to shut it off, then returned to gaze incredulously at Potter. Harry Potter, in his tent. In his bed. Potter had blinked sleepily, rubbed his eyes, then stretched luxuriously. "Good morning," he said, his voice scratchy and slightly lower than usual.

"Good morning," Draco had replied somewhat nervously, scanning Potter's face for signs of panic or accusation. There were none.

"Don't want to get up yet," Potter said, making sleepy noises and making to curl up on his side.

Draco laughed. "Potter! That's why you oversleep all the time! Come on, you've got to get up!"

"Mmmmm. Stay here with me."

"We can't, Harry. Come on. Training, remember? Got to go learn how to save the world. Are you a coffee person?"

And Potter had sighed and confessed that he was, so Draco had made them both coffee (well, "made" in the loose sense - if conjuring counted) and coaxed Potter out of bed. "Hey," he said.

Potter, now dressed, was sitting cross-legged on his pillow. "What?" he asked, eyes meeting Draco's over the rim of his coffee cup.

"Uh - do you - feel okay?" Draco stumbled over the words, hating the awkwardness of the question, but needing to know.

Potter had nodded, though. "Yeah. Fine. You?"

Draco had smiled, relieved. "More than fine. Great."

Potter had smiled back. "Me, too."

Draco, glad that his tent was at the end of the row where there was less pedestrian traffic, thought of something. "I guess Hedwig's figured it out," he said, still smiling.

Potter's smile turned into a flash of grin. "That sneaky bird," he said, without fire. "Yeah, she'll be delighted. She's been pecking me half to death since about March, you know."

"Over me?"

"Yeah, what else?"

"Remind me to thank her," Draco said fondly. He checked the time. "We've got to go! We've got five minutes to get to our fields. I'm at One this morning for weights. Where are you?"

Potter groaned. "Fifteen," he said. "*Way* out there."

"Well, get going, then, or you'll get more demerits."

Another groan. "Don't remind me." Potter set down his cup and Vanished it, then turned to Draco. "Look - about all that mess before - "

"We can talk about it later!" Draco said. "You have to go!"

Potter nodded, then grabbed Draco by the shoulders and kissed him, coffee breath and all. "See you later, then."

"Yeah. Later," Draco echoed.

"Sit with me at lunch?" Potter gave him a winning look, which Draco couldn't resist.

He bit back a comment about the Weasel, and just said, "Okay."

Another kiss, then Draco checked the coast. "You're good," he said.

Potter exited quickly, Draco right behind him, and they quickly headed in separate directions.

Until later, at least. Draco ran to Field One and was almost surprised that his feet hadn't sprouted wings overnight.

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Chapter: 11

Chapter 11: Lunch, Supper & an Owl

Draco entered the eating lodge at lunch time, heart thumping stupidly. Calm *down*, he told himself for about the tenth time. It's just lunch. I'm just going to sit at the same table as Potter, and I'm doing it because he asked me to. It's not like we're announcing anything to the world, although Granger will know in an instant, naturally. Speaking of whom, actually, she and the Weasel were just ahead of him, Draco trailing awkwardly along behind them and hoping they wouldn't be difficult about the intended seating arrangements.

Potter was there already, which was a relief. Granger and Weasel headed over, and then, to Draco's immense relief, the Weasley twins entered from the far side. George caught his eye and raised his eyebrows. Potter's table was between them, and Draco nodded toward it. George just shrugged, turned to Fred, and they headed over. The twins got there first, so Draco made it look as though he was just going to sit with them, and just *happened* to have sat down next to Potter, coincidentally.

Fred had started talking to him right away, so Draco was able to continue pretending, for the moment, that he was only there to sit with them. Potter's hand was on his thigh under the table, though, and Draco put his hand over it at once.

"… and then Moody gave us each ten demerits," Fred concluded, not seeming remotely concerned by this.

Granger leaned forward to address Fred, who was sitting beside Draco, across from his twin. "How many do you two have by now, then?" she asked, but her eyes cut to Draco. Draco (knowing that it was inevitable anyway), met her gaze evenly. Her eyebrows went up slightly, and Draco gave her a quick nod. She smiled, then went back to listening to the twins' rambling recollections of their demerit-gaining activities.

The Weasel was absorbed in this, too, and while everyone was looking the other way (except Granger, probably, damn her), Potter leaned in, just a little. "How was your morning?" he asked quietly.

Draco turned to look at Potter for the first time since sitting down, and squeezed the hand beneath his. "Fine," he said. "Tiring, I guess. How was yours?"

Potter shrugged. "Okay. Neville accidentally set Hooch's robes on fire."

Accidentally? "I'm sure that went over well," Draco said, lip twisting.

"Not really, no," Potter said.

He was talking a bit too fast, and Draco suddenly realized that Potter was petrified of being found out. Well, that was fair - the Weasel would probably have a fit, not to mention the fact that they would both get in trouble from Shacklebolt. But - if there was anything he could do to reassure his skittish, new lover, it would have to come from his friends. Potter's friends. Draco leaned over in return. "Harry," he said, very quietly, "Granger knows."

Potter jerked as though he'd been scalded. "What?"

"She knows. We talked about it, once, and she's definitely figured it out." Draco waited.

Potter appeared to be taking purposely-deep breaths. "Um, okay," he said. His eyes flickered up to Granger, who gave him an apologetic smile. Potter didn't say anything; he couldn't, right there in the middle of the table. Meanwhile, the twins were talking to Draco again, and he wasn't hearing a word they were saying.

This sitting-together business was perhaps more stressful than it was worth. Draco finished eating and leaned over again. "I'm going to my tent. Stop by before the next session, okay?"

Potter gave him a panicked look, but it was the sort of panic that suggested he was afraid of what was going on with Draco rather than afraid of visiting. Good. That was preferable, definitely. Potter nodded, still too quickly. "Okay."

Draco excused himself, and left.

* * *

The scratching was light and quick. "Come in," Draco called.

He saw brown hands unzipping the tent flap, and Potter ducked quickly inside. Before he could say anything, Draco was on his feet and pulling Potter into the tallest bit of the tent, in the center, pulling him into his arms and kissing him hard. Potter kissed back enthusiastically, and made a small noise in the back of his throat. "I'm sorry!" he said, as soon as they were able to speak again.

Draco pushed an unruly lock of dark hair off Potter's forehead. "What for?"

"For - all that," Potter said apologetically. "Lunch. All the awkwardness. I realized we hadn't even talked about telling people or not telling people and - "

"And about ten billion other fairly important things," Draco finished for him. "Yeah, I know. Are you busy tonight?"

Potter looked surprised, and then pleased. "No," he said. "Are you?"

"Busy with you," Draco grinned, feeling like an idiot. He still couldn't really believe that Potter wasn't backing out, though. "Do you want to risk a walk, or would you rather just talk in here? Or your tent. That'd be fine, too."

"Your tent is better," Potter said quickly. "Further away from the other ones, you know? Mine's right in the middle of the row."

"True," Draco conceded.

"And," Potter added cheekily, "it's a lot warmer in the tents. In case we - "

"I see," Draco said, studying Potter's face. "In that case - *definitely* here, then!"

Potter laughed. With an almost experimental air, he moved in and kissed Draco's jaw, starting right below his ear and moving down to his throat. Draco swallowed hard - he hadn't been expecting *that*. Not now, at least. Potter's lips were soft and warm, and Draco's jeans were, again, much too tight. "Potter," he said, his voice sounding strangled, "what are you doing?"

Potter pulled back and gave him a quizzical look. "What does it look like I'm doing?" He kissed Draco's throat again, and Draco felt his balls tightening.

"We - have - training," he managed to say, gripping Potter by his hair, just before his mouth and Potter's mouth somehow ended up together again. He'd meant to finish that sentence, too, but Potter's lips and tongue were simply far too distracting, stroking against his. And - oh, gods, he was lost now - Potter's hands were on his arse again, unapologetically, fingers digging in.

Potter pulled his head back for a moment. "I just want you to know that I'm not ashamed of this. Of us, I mean. I just think we should wait before people know. It wouldn't go over well."

"No, it wouldn't," Draco agreed. "That's fine with me."

"I just didn't want you to think I was having second thoughts, at lunch there."

"I didn't think that, but you did seem pretty nervous," Draco admitted.

"I was. But not now. Not here." Potter's lips grazed Draco's chin. "And we still have half an hour," he murmured, his voice soft and husky.

"Oh, gods." Draco allowed himself to be pulled down to his own bedroll. *When did I get so submissive?* Definitely time to change that. He rolled them over so that he was on top and clawed at Potter's jeans until they were open, pulled away the offending material separating Draco from Potter's cock. Potter had propped himself up on his elbows and was watching Draco lazily. Draco smiled up at him once, then turned his attention to the cock in front of him.

It was *very* nice, really. Almost fully-hard already, nestled in a dark thatch of hair which proved to be, upon inspection, softer than it looked. Draco ran his nose along the underside of the cock, and followed the path with his tongue. Potter gasped and jerked, hips canting up off the bedroll for a second. Draco gave him another smile, only wicked this time, and shifted his weight so that

he could hold Potter's hips down. *He* was giving the blow job, and *he* would call the shots, thank you very much. Draco let his teeth graze the corona of Potter's cock, and its owner made a keening sound. Draco laughed. "Quiet, you," he mumbled, and closed his lips around the trembling flesh before his face.

Potter gasped again, and his back arched, despite the restraining pressure on his hips. Draco could see his lover's fingers curling into the sleeping bag's silky material - probably preventing himself from grabbing Draco's head and forcing it down to the base of his cock. Which Draco appreciated. He'd never done this before, and the entirety of his own experience of receiving this particular act could be summed up in the two blow jobs he'd gotten from Zabini back in April. Not wanting to think of Zabini, Draco tried to remember as much as he could about the annoying git's (astonishingly good) technique and apply it. He tightened his lips and moved his moved up and down along Potter's cock, and that seemed to go over well - judging by the noises Potter was trying so desperately to suppress, at any rate. Ah, yes, mustn't forget tongue. Draco sucked almost viciously, cupping the underside of Potter's prick with his tongue, rubbing it slowly, sensuously, along the throbbing vein there. Potter's breathing suspended and he came then, in a rush of white heat, into Draco's mouth. Draco had never tasted someone else's come before, never had it in his mouth, and for a second, was afraid he was going to choke. He managed to swallow it, though - it was salty, slightly bitter, but not altogether unpleasant. Draco held Potter's cock in his mouth until its eruptions had stopped, then released it.

Potter's face was flushed and damp, and he hauled Draco up by his arms and kissed him violently. Rolled them over so that Draco was beneath him, and, still kissing him wildly, moved his knee up to Draco's aching groin, rubbing it. Draco pushed against it without shame, just needing to get off. He'd probably leaked right through his jeans by now. But Potter's hand was there now, roughly ripping Draco's jeans open, sliding the silk boxers down. Another kiss, then Potter was down there, face in Draco's crotch, licking - oh *gods*, he was licking Draco *balls* - Draco shoved two knuckles into his mouth and bit down hard, to keep himself from shouting. Potter's talented tongue was working its way up from the base of his cock, catching the newest drop of precome oozing from the slit. The tip of Potter's tongue *pressed* there, and Draco's entire body shuddered. Potter's eyes flicked up and he smiled, every bit as wickedly as Draco had done to him. And then his cock disappeared into Potter's mouth. Draco could have died. He'd thought that blow jobs were pretty damned near the top when it came to things sensual, but he hadn't realized that everything was heightened when you were in it for more than just getting off. Potter loved him, or so he'd said, and here he was, sucking the very life out of Draco's cock. Draco fought his own urge to thrust up so far that he'd be fucking Potter's *throat*. One of Potter's hands came up and started massaging along the base of his cock. Draco was close - he could feel it - and then the fingers of Potter's *other* hand were suddenly pressing on Draco's perineum, and he was lost. He came fiercely, spurting into that hot mouth around him, jaws clenched so tightly that he couldn't even breathe. Potter made a small choking sound, but swallowed anyway, fingers idly caressing Draco's thigh now. It was mind-blowing. It was wonderful.

Draco had tasted himself in Zabini's mouth, but that was a long time ago. And it tasted different in Harry's mouth.

Harry.

He'd just thought that, thought *Harry*. Not Potter.

Either way. Draco kissed the ex-Gryffindor with a great deal of passion and abandon, and decided that he'd never felt better in his life.

Those green eyes flickered open. "What time is it?" Potter asked, his voice a little hoarse.

Draco groped for his wand, found it. "We have ten minutes, still."

Potter reached for him, stroked his face. "I want to spend them with you."

"You sure? I don't want to prove myself a distraction, after all."

Potter kissed him soundly. "Let me worry about that. Trust me, I do enough of it by myself without having you worrying, too."

Draco let it go. "Okay." He shifted closer and they kissed slowly, languidly, and with a lot of tongue. Life wasn't perfect, maybe, but this was. Draco closed his eyes.

* * *

It was supper. The dynamics had all changed dramatically amongst the ex-Gryffindors, apparently, since lunch. The twins said something vague about Granger having been seen talking very seriously with Krum, and their git brother being furious, naturally. Granger was sitting by herself, glowering, and Potter was sitting with the Weasel. It looked, from across the lodge, as though Potter was placating his best friend. Weasley had his face in both hands and was staring mutinously at the table. *Better him than me,* Draco thought wearily. The twins chose a table somewhere in the middle. Krum was nowhere to be seen.

Draco caught Potter's eye across the lodge and gave him a quick smile. Potter returned it, his entire face lighting up, then quickly turned back to the Weasel, asking something. Probably for a repetition. Draco smirked to himself and gave himself a second helping of mashed potatoes.

A brown tawny owl entered the open door and swooped over to Draco, to his own surprise. Owls here generally came in the morning, like in most places. It dropped a heavy, square white envelope onto Draco's plate, or would have if he hadn't caught it first, and flew off without so much as a backward glance. Draco happened to look across at Potter just then, only to find Potter looking back at him, with a look of faint horror on his face. He was holding an identical envelope.

Draco's heart sank into his feet. Ignoring the twins' banter for the moment, he ripped open the envelope and scanned the short letter. It read:

Dear Mr. Malfoy,

It has come to our attention that you or persons in your presence have violated the code of Acceptable Spell Use in Sleeping Quarters last night, and therefore, disciplinary measures will be taken. Please meet myself and Professors Moody and McGonagall at eight o'clock this evening in the staff tent located at the back of Field One. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Kingsley Shacklebolt,
Training Supervisor

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Draco's eyes blurred. Why hadn't he thought of the spell code?! What had he done? Were the tents charmed so that they knew if someone else had entered? Only, Draco wouldn't have thought that they would have had the foresight to apply it to same-sex situations as well. Perhaps the tents were spelled to discover sexual activity of any kind and to report it. With some clause that precluded wanking. Only, the letter had said last night, not this afternoon, and nothing like that had happened last night. Draco raked his memory. It dawned on

him very suddenly - *oh*. Potter's enlargement spell on his bedroll. That must've been it. Damn it. He glanced at Potter worriedly. This was precisely what Potter had been afraid of happening - well, this and losing the war - but Draco hadn't expected it to happen on the very first full *day* of their relationship, for fuck's sake! Just when he thought they'd finally gotten their shit sorted, too! It would only be fitting for it to end like this - suddenly and ingloriously.

They had to talk before their meeting, so they knew at least where they stood before the whole thing started. Draco caught Potter's eye and nodded toward the doors. Potter gave him a quick nod, then looked back at the Weasel, flashing him a hand with the fingers outspread. Five. Five minutes, then. Draco got it. He excused himself, once again, and departed.

* * *

He was leaning against one of the few trees when Potter exited, trying to keep himself calm. Potter looked around, then walked over, envelope in hand. "Hey," he said, with a bit of a smile, "stop looking so agonized. We're going to be okay."

Relief. But he hadn't realized he'd been looking agonized. Draco attempted to pull his features into a neutral expression. "Good," he said. He glanced around, then stepped forward and kissed Potter gently. Potter returned it warmly, then stepped quickly away again.

"I thought of something," he said. "In there. I'm guessing the spell they're talking about was my enlargement spell on your bed - I'm sorry, I totally forgot about the spell rules. I just never really use anything but the basics by myself, I guess. But anyway, I thought we could just tell them that I'd stopped by for whatever reason, and that we'd started talking about how small the tents are or something, and just played around with trying to make it more homelike. Or something like that. I'll take full responsibility for the spell."

Draco thought this over. It wasn't bad, actually. And it firmly precluded any notion of telling the staff about their relationship. "Okay," he said. "Only, you have so many demerits already. Why don't we tell them that I did it?"

Potter looked surprised again, but smiled. "They probably know which wand it was," he pointed out.

"But they owled me, too," Draco argued. "They might just know what tent it happened in. And they might hold me responsible anyway, for allowing the code to be broken in my presence."

"Well, either way," Potter said, looking suddenly weary. "Eight o'clock, is it?"

"Yeah."

"What do you want to do until then?"

It was Draco's turn to be a little surprised. "Are you - done with the Weasel - Weasley, I mean, then?" He caught himself a little too late, and gave Potter an apologetic grin.

Potter tried to look stern, but said, "Yeah, I think so. He just needs some time to be by himself, I think. Things with him and Hermione aren't going so well."

"Yeah, I heard," Draco said. "What's going on?"

"Let's walk and talk," Potter said, eyeing the emptying lodge not twenty yards away. They turned and fell into step. Potter was heading toward Field Three, the largest of them, and not far (obviously) from Field One. Draco checked the time; it was just past six-thirty. "Basically," Potter continued, "I think that Hermione's not sure who she likes more, Ron or Krum, and while I don't think she's trying to hurt either of them, I think she needs to make up her mind. All I know is that she apparently had a really long talk with Krum after lunch and then, in Ron's opinion, at least, flirted with him all afternoon at training."

Draco frowned. He hadn't remembered that happening, exactly, but then again, he'd been absorbed in his own (ecstatic) thoughts most of the afternoon. "I'm in the same group as all of them," he said. "I don't really recall any flirting, as such, but I was also rather preoccupied, you know."

Potter grinned. "Good," he said. "I'm sure it could be Ron misinterpreting things, but who knows? Hermione *did* like Krum back in our fourth year, and kept writing to him for who knows how long afterwards. Although again, I thought she liked Ron back then already, too, but that she maybe didn't know it. Or did, but was too fed up with Ron most of the time to act on it, or something. I don't know."

"Sounds like a match made in heaven," Draco said wryly. "It's not love without some serious

angsting, I always say."

Potter nudged him, playfully. "I guess we would know that, hunh?"

"Guess we would." Draco cast his eyes about for people, then guided Potter firmly off into one of the tree-barriers that divided each field, between Three and Two, in this case. "Let's make out."

Potter's only response was to twine his arms around Draco's neck and kiss him hungrily. He pushed Draco up against a tree and wrapped one knee around Draco's hip, thrusting against him. They kissed for several long, wet moments, and then Potter was trying to talk again. "Draco."

"Mmm-hmm?" Draco responded, from somewhere in the vicinity of Potter's neck.

"How much have you done?"

Draco lifted his face. "What?"

"How much have you done? Like - um - sexually, I mean," Potter said, biting his lip and reddening.

It was very sweet. And, as Potter was probably every bit as inexperienced as Draco was, he didn't feel badly about confessing at all. "As much as I've done, I've done with you," he said.

"What?" Potter sounded astonished. "You're joking!"

"No I'm not. All I'd ever done before you was get two blow jobs. And I gave a hand job once."

Potter's green eyes narrowed jealously. "With who?"

"Whom, dear," Draco corrected. He looked away and admitted it. "Blaise Zabini."

"That fucker!"

"Shh, you'll scare the birds."

"I can't believe - oh, that *wanker*!" Potter said, still quite volubly.

"It was a long time ago. I was desperate," Draco said, with painful honesty. "And he wouldn't leave me alone."

Potter nodded. "Okay," he said, sounding calmer. "I guess it's none of my business, anyway, who you did what with who before - well, yesterday, I guess."

"It's okay. What about you, then?" Draco asked, curious despite himself.

Potter flushed wholly. "Nothing," he said, obviously embarrassed. "I kissed Cho once, in fourth year. Otherwise - nothing."

Draco stared. "That was your first blow job, today?"

Potter nodded shyly, biting his lip. "Was it alright?"

"Alright?! Fucking *hell*, Harry! Yes, it was 'alright' - it was fucking amazing, you twit!"

Potter looked immensely relieved. "Was it? Oh, good." He smiled again, mischievously. "You were pretty damned amazing, too."

"My first one, too," Draco said, shrugging selfconsciously.

"What? I thought you said - "

"I said, I *got* two," Draco interrupted. "I'd never actually given one before."

Potter looked very impressed. "Well, colour me surprised," he said. "I was all nervous because I thought I was going down on Hogwarts' sex god."

"I'm a virgin, actually, thank you very much," Draco said loftily.

Potter bit his neck. "Good. So am I. I want to be your first."

"You will be."

"What time is it?"

It couldn't have been more than ten or fifteen minutes since he'd last checked. "We have time," Draco said. "*Lots* of time." And with that, he sealed his mouth over Potter's.

Potter kissed back for a moment or two, then pushed off slightly to ask, anxiously - "But we're not going to - "

"Not yet," Draco agreed, cupping Potter's warm cheek in his hand. "And not here," he added, glancing around at the darkening belt of trees hiding them from the world.

"Okay," Potter said, sounding relieved again. They kissed again, and they rubbed themselves together, slowly. And, after a bit, not so slowly. "I have to touch you," Potter breathed, a few minutes later.

"Well, if you have to, you have to," Draco said, attempting a drawl, but it came out rather breathy. He unbuttoned and unzipped his own jeans while Potter saw to his, and reached for Potter's cock. Potter's hand closed around Draco's erection as their mouths came together again, tongues moving at the same speed as their hands. They thrust roughly into each other's hands, and Potter's other hand was on Draco's hip, pulling him closer even as his hips kept Draco quite firmly against the tree behind him. Feeling creative, Draco slid his free hand up Potter's shirt, laughing into Potter's mouth as the other squeaked at Draco's cold fingers on his nipple. It pebbled under Draco's touch, and Potter moaned when he pinched it, trapping Draco with his chest now. Draco increased the speed of his hand, jerking Potter off harder, faster. Potter reciprocated, and that feeling was rising against, curling up through Draco from his very toes, bursting forth out of his cock into Potter's hand - Potter groaned loudly and came himself, hotly.

They kissed until their heartbeats had slowed again, and Draco thought that the past twenty-four hours had almost made up for the last four months. Something occurred to him then. "Hey. What's the date today?" he asked suddenly.

Potter looked startled, but thought hard, for a moment. "I think it's July twenty… twenty-seventh? Yeah. The twenty-seventh," he confirmed. "Why?"

Draco smiled. "Tomorrow's my birthday," he said. "Happy birthday to me, *indeed*."

Potter looked shocked. "What? It is not!"

"It is. I promise you."

Potter laughed. "My birthday's three days after yours."

"Is it?" Draco was quite surprised as well - although, it belatedly occurred to him that he should have known that - what was it, something about the Prophecy, maybe, and Potter having been born as the seventh month died or something like that… whatever. It didn't matter. "Well then, happy birthday to you, too."

"I'll say," Potter said, looking happy. "Let's celebrate at midnight of the twenty-ninth. That'll be exactly halfway in between."

Leave it to an ex-Gryffindor to think of something like that. Draco smiled. "Okay."

* * *

Draco crossed one knee over the other, and tried not to look nervous. It was difficult. Shacklebolt, Moody and McGonagall were all staring at their two files, passing them back and forth. Potter had explained the story, talking too fast, of course. So far, they hadn't said whether or not they believed it just yet.

Moody made a thoughtful sound, drawing Draco's attention to him, and once again, Draco was profoundly glad that this particular incarnation of the man had not been the one to have Transfigured him into a ferret back in fourth year. That had been absolutely humiliating. Even if the real Moody had heard the stories, later, it still helped things, if only marginally, to know that he hadn't actually witnessed it. Shacklebolt made a deep humming noise then, and requested Harry's file again.

"Mr. Potter," he said, "you have already earned yourself over fifty demerits. We had not yet discussed what sort of discipline that would earn, between the three of us, but I would like to know what you feel would be appropriate."

"And while you're thinking," McGonagall put in, "I would like to know what you were doing in Mr. Malfoy's tent in the first place. It is not my understanding that the two of you are, or ever have been, friends." She looked extremely stern, almost put-out, and looked back and forth between them.

Draco glanced at Potter, then said, even as Potter opened his mouth, "That would be my doing, Professor. We were playing Quidditch last night, and I caught the Snitch. In my - excitement, it seems that I forgot to return it. So Harry came by my tent to see if I had it. I know we haven't been friends in the past, but we had a chance to talk a bit, and we've decided to put our differences behind us for the sake of the war. So, that's how we ended up conversing a bit. It was almost more of a joke, the spell," he added. "We were just talking about ways to make the tents seem more - I don't know, homey, I guess."

"Yes, so Potter said," Moody growled. He looked at Shacklebolt. "What do you say, Kingsley? They didn't mean any harm by it, and if it means we don't have to deal with the age-old Potter-Malfoy dispute any more, I'm all for letting it go this time."

Shacklebolt rubbed his chin. Looked at McGonagall. "What do you think, Minerva?"

McGonagall pursed her lips. "Oh, I suppose so," she said reluctantly. "But no more demerits!" she said to Potter, shaking her finger at him. "You have almost earned yourself as many as the Weasleys!"

Potter winced. "Sorry, Professor," he said. "I'll try really hard to be on time and not to break any more rules."

"I hope you will." McGonagall rose. "In that case, let us adjourn."

Shacklebolt nodded. "We'll consider this a warning, then," he said, but he clapped a heavy hand on Potter's shoulder before he and Draco left. Their precious boy hero, after all, Draco thought, eyes narrowed. They walked in silence toward the tents.

"Can we stop by my tent?" Harry asked, somewhere in Field One. "I have to let Hedwig out to hunt. And get a change of clothes, and stuff."

"Sure," Draco said. "Actually, why don't I just keep going, and you can come when you're ready? Bring Hedwig by; I haven't seen her for a few days now."

Harry smiled. "Okay. She'll like that. I should probably check on Ron, too."

"Okay. So, whenever you're ready," Draco reiterated.

"I'll be there soon."

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Chapter: 12

Chapter 12: A Letter and a Party of Two

"I just thought of something," Potter said suddenly.

Draco opened his eyes sleepily. "Mmmm?"

"Draco." Potter's hand was on his bare back, and Draco thought, *warm*. Potter was always so warm, and it felt good. Warming his own coldness away.

"What?" No good, he still sounded very groggy.

"Shouldn't they have told you to put your bed back to the way it was?" Potter asked, running fingers through his dishevelled morning hair. He was sitting up partway, and, upon closer inspection, looked as though he'd been awake for a little while already.

Draco processed this slowly, the words filtering through his sleep-addled brain. "What day is it?" he asked.

Potter looked down at him, brows knitted. His mouth started to form a question, then abandoned the idea. "Friday."

Draco groaned. "Gods, I was hoping it was Sunday."

"No such luck," Potter agreed. "Why?"

"Well, you cast it on Wednesday, right? Two nights ago? Maybe they just assumed I'd taken it off by now."

"But they didn't even ask," Potter pointed out, obviously still agitated.

He had a point. It *was* odd. "Looks strange if I ask about it, though, doesn't it?" Draco asked slowly.

"Yeah. Too strange," Potter agreed.

"Well, let it go until it comes up, then," Draco suggested, shrugging. "Too much else to think about, anyway."

"True." Potter finally smiled at him, though faint worry lines remained around his eyes. But he shifted back down under the blanket (sleeping bag, whatever) and over to Draco. "Good morning," he said.

"Belated," Draco pointed out.

Potter grinned, but then his eyes flew open. "Oh my - it's your birthday! Happy birthday, you!"

"Thanks," Draco said, half-embarrassed. Birthdays had never been a big occasion in the Manor, growing up, and as it always took place when school was out, he'd never been accustomed to expecting much of it.

Potter inched even closer and drew Draco's face toward his for a kiss. "I didn't buy you a present."

"That's okay. I didn't buy one for yours, either," Draco said, returning the feeble joke. Then added, with a smirk, "Guess I'll just have to settle for you, then."

Potter closed his eyes and smiled blissfully. "I guess you still won't let me apologize for being such a prat and taking so long," he said.

"Right."

"I love you, you know."

"Good thing, that," Draco said, and pulled Potter on top of him. "What time is it, you Gryffindor minx?"

"Early," Potter said assuringly, smiling down at him. "Before six."

"Why in Merlin's name are you awake already? Why am I?" Draco demanded.

Potter knew there was no real heat in this, though, and wriggled his way down Draco's body. "Because if you were sleeping, you wouldn't be able to enjoy *this*." And with that, he nuzzled his nose into Draco's half-hard cock and began licking, which he already seemed to know was Draco's major weakness.

"Oh - gods, Harry - yes I would, damn it - I would have woken up - *fuck*, that's good. You are the most brilliant, beautiful person ever. Don't you dare stop that." Heart rate doubling, Draco wove his long fingers into Potter's hair and continued to talk as his cock was persuaded into full hardness. When it was, Potter kissed the very tip of it with a silly grin, and slid his lips over the head. Draco felt his bones melt away.

A few, breathless minutes later, he was gasping out his release and covering Potter's throat with the warmth of it, hips still juddering spasmically. "Gods," he breathed.

Potter gave him a sweet smile and crawled back up beside him, arranging himself in the crook of Draco's limp arm. "Happy birthday," he said.

Draco opened his eyes and eyed his lover cryptically. "Do I get to return the favour?" he asked.

"Nope," Potter said simply.

"Why not?" Draco asked, curiously.

"It's your birthday," Potter said, now stubborn.

"So what?"

"So, I'll just - "

"But I want to."

Harry turned his head and locked eyes with him. "Are you just saying that?"

"No! It's my birthday. I get to do what I want," Draco said stubbornly. Neither of them pointed out that running laps was not high on the list of things which Draco Malfoy was likely to want to do, least of all on his birthday, but that he *was*, in fact, going to be doing that today.

Potter grinned suddenly, his features becoming lazy. "Well, if you *really* want to, then… "

"I do. Gryffindor," Draco said, making sure to utter it like an insult.

"A true Slytherin would have just enjoyed it," Potter threw back. "Take what you can get, right?"

Draco blinked. "Right," he said. Enough with the banter. He pulled Potter to him and kissed him for a long time.

* * *

At lunch, Draco received an owl, which was a surprise indeed. He was not expecting anyone to remember his birthday. Crabbe and Goyle had probably never known when it was in the first place, and there was little hope that anyone else, even Pansy, would have remembered. He'd hardly even spoken to Pansy since Christmas. Curiously, and filled with a slight sense of foreboding, Draco opened the letter. The twins were elsewhere, apparently. He was sitting alone, as was Granger, at the far end of the same table. The letter was from - Draco took a deep breath, and glanced around for the owl, but it had already gone.

Dear Draco,

I remembered that it's your birthday today,
so I thought I'd drop you a line. I have no
idea if you'll get this or not, since no one has
a fucking clue where you are right now, but
if you get this, then happy birthday.

There are about a million things I want to ask
you right now, like ***where the fuck you are****,*
but I know you won't tell me. I'm not supposed
to tell you what I'm doing, either, but I think you
can probably guess. Crabbe and Goyle are here,
too. If you're in the opposite sort of place, then
I should probably tell you that there's pretty
serious price on your head at the moment. The
rumours around here are rampant. I've heard
you've been disowned, that you're on the run,
that you're with him*, if you know who*

I mean, and whatever it is, I hope you know what you're doing, because I sure as hell don't. It would seem that you've royally pissed Someone off, and I'm a tad concerned about you.

I'm sure you don't miss me in the least, and somehow, I can't really picture you here - Draco Malfoy, enrolled in a fucking army! Taking orders! I would pay real money to see that, you know. Anyway, take care, and I hope you're having a good day, wherever you are.

I still think about you, and if I ever see you again, I'm not letting you go until I've convinced you to stay with me. Trust me, I can be ***very*** *persuasive now. Take care, Draco.*

Your old friend,
Blaise Zabini.

Draco put the letter down and took several deep breaths at once. So even Zabini knew about the headhunters. They really were out there, it was not just Snape being paranoid. Not that Draco had ever disbelieved Snape for a moment, but still. There were rumours, damn it. By "him", he was fairly sure that Zabini meant Dumbledore. It amused him as much as it annoyed him that Zabini couldn't picture Draco actually following orders. *Guess it just goes to show how desperate I was*, he thought sardonically. *I mean, it's not as though I really had a choice, was it?*

Now, of course, it was different. He would do what it took to stay with Potter and keep the silly fool alive. But Zabini's words rankled, not least of which, the not-so-thinly-veiled threat at the end of it. "Persuasive", indeed. In other words, Zabini planned to subdue, rape, and perform all other manner of foul activity on Draco the next time they met. Romantic proposition, really, Draco thought, rolling his eyes. He was finished eating, and got up from the table, still holding the parchment. He shoved it into his pocket and left the lodge.

Not ten steps away, the door behind him opened and slammed shut again, and footsteps thumped on the dry grass behind him. "Who's it from?" Potter demanded.

Draco turned around. "Hello," he said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Who's it from, damn it?" Potter's face was staining red.

"What makes you think it was of any importance?"

"Because I saw your face when you read it, you git," Potter said. "It's not from your father, is it?"

Draco studied Potter's face for a moment, and contemplated the amount of rage which was surely forthcoming, once his lover discovered the sender's identity. "You're not going to like it," he hedged. "I don't like it, myself."

"Who. Is. It. From."

Draco sighed, pulled it out of his pocket and handed it over. "Please don't combust on me," he said dryly.

Potter was scanning it quickly, his eyes moving behind his glasses, his cheeks growing steadily redder and redder. "That bastard!" he exploded, at the end of it. "I'm going to *kill* him!"

Draco grabbed Potter's wrist and dragged him off to the far side of the lodge, where fewer people were likely to witness this. "Listen to me," he said firmly. "I did *not* ask for that letter. I do not now and never did care for Zabini. He has not contacted me before this, since school ended. I am fully aware of the threat at the end, and it's not going to happen, so just calm down. He doesn't even know that I'm with someone."

"Would it matter if he did?" Potter spat, sparks of fury shooting from his eyes like wand sparks.

"Probably not," Draco admitted. "But still. He has no idea where I am. The next time either of us sees him will probably be in battle, at some point. And then you can most certainly hex him. Otherwise, just forget about it, okay?"

Potter wavered. "Are you going to write back?"

"I don't know, Harry! I just got it! I haven't even *thought* about it yet!"

Potter let out his breath, grinned sheepishly, and raked his fingers through his hair. "Sorry," he said. "Overreacted, didn't I?"

Draco shook his head. "Just forget it," he said. "I'm not going to leave you in order to go tearing after some Death Eater-in-training whom I've been turning down regularly since sixth year."

"Except those two times - "

"Don't even say it," Draco said, suddenly quiet. "Just - don't, Harry. I'm with you. I love you. Everything else is history."

Potter relaxed. "Okay," he said. "Sorry."

"Don't be. No one's ever been that jealous over me before." Draco smiled.

* * *

In the end, all he did was scribble a short note back, which Potter read over his shoulder, from within the still-enlarged bedroll on Saturday night. It was curt, and to the point.

Dear Blaise,

Odd, calling you that, since I've never
in my life addressed you as anything
other than "Zabini", but somehow it
seems rude to open a letter that way.

Thank you for your birthday wishes.
I had a very nice birthday, which I
spent with my boyfriend. He wasn't
very happy with the end of your letter,

I must say, and neither was I. I think it would be for the best if we didn't correspond any further, as our choices have obviously led us in different directions.

Thank you for the warning, as well, but I am fully aware of the circumstances.

Sincerely,

Draco Malfoy.

"What do you think?" he asked, tilting it so that Harry could read it more easily.

His lover scanned it, and nodded critically. "It's good," he said. "You were polite, but to the point. And I like being referred to as your boyfriend."

"Kind of a juvenile term, but it's one even he will understand," Draco said lightly, and sealed it. "Hey, Hedwig," he said, to the ball of white feathers just waking up in her cage. She'd still been asleep when Potter had arrived that night, so Potter had brought her with him.

A soft hoot, and the amber eyes opened. Hedwig looked them both over through her beady gaze, then gave a definitely satisfied-sounding hoot, the way she had been doing a lot lately. It pleased Draco to no end, for some reason. He'd had a long chat with her on Friday night, when Potter had gone to the washroom, and thanked her for all her help.

"Can you deliver something for me?" Draco coaxed, holding out the letter. He reached for Potter's wand (his was out of reach) and opened her cage.

She hopped out obligingly, and stuck her leg out at him. Draco affixed the scroll securely and said, "It's for Blaise Zabini. I don't know where he is, but it's some sort of Death Eater training camp. Do you think you can find it?"

Hedwig gave a dignified-sounding hoot and accepted the letter. "Thanks, girl," Draco said,

stroking her soft head. "Come back here when you're finished hunting, okay?"

"Unless it's light already," Potter put in. "If it's light, come back to our tent."

Another hoot, and Hedwig hopped toward the door. Draco crawled forward and let her out.

"Come back here," Potter said lazily, and Draco turned to look at him.

His lover was reclined, sans-glasses, on the bedroll. Limbs sprawled, and almost completely naked, he looked every inch the object of Draco's desires. "You're wearing one garment too many," Draco pronounced critically.

Potter laughed. "So are you," he said.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I bet I can be naked before you."

"No you can't!" Giggling madly (thank the *gods* Silencing charms were allowed within the tents!!), Potter immediately scrambled out of his boxers, only Draco was faster. He'd also been standing, and had the advantage.

"I win," he announced grandly, and went to stand over his now-nude lover, hands on his hips.

Potter squinted hazily up at him, a goofy smile on his face. "What does that mean?" he asked, his voice dreamy.

And suddenly, the moment was serious. Draco sat down then, between Potter's legs, his own knees hugging his lover's shoulders. "Are we ready for this?" he asked.

"To - uh - have sex, you mean?" Potter stuttered.

"Yeah. That's what I mean," Draco confirmed softly. He moved his thumbs gently over Potter's hard shoulders.

"I think so," Potter said, after a split second.

Draco studied his lover's face again. It seemed he'd been doing that a lot lately. "I could bottom, this time," he said quietly. Offering. He suddenly understood Zabini's offer, even though he hadn't wanted it, hadn't wanted to think of that git, now. It was about giving something, and in his case, something unique, which he'd never given before and never would again. And he wanted to do it.

Potter looked astonishingly surprised. "You would?" he asked, disbelievingly.

"Of course I would," Draco said. "What kind of person do you think I am, that I would insist that *you* always bottom, or something?"

"But lots of people - "

" - have their traditional roles, I know," Draco finished. "But not us. We never have, so why should we start out with preconceived notions? Who knows what we'll each like best?"

"What if we both like the same thing best?" Potter asked carefully, watching him. From a range of three or four inches, this was very intense.

"Then we'll take turns," Draco said, with a shrug. "Give and take, right? Isn't that the Gryffindor model for relationships?"

"I think you're thinking Ravenclaw," Potter said, smiling. "Our way probably has more to do with who wins the arm wrestle."

"True enough," Draco conceded. He moved his hands up to his lover's face. "We don't have to, if you're not ready. There's no rush. We can do other things."

"No - it's not that," Potter said quickly. "I just - wanted to ask those things, that's all. I am ready. I want this. I was hoping this would happen tonight."

"Our birthday night," Draco said, smiling.

"And, it's Sunday tomorrow, too," Potter said, obviously gleeful. "We can sleep in!"

"I'm not getting out of bed before *three*," Draco said firmly.

Potter laughed again. "Then I'll be here with you," he said quietly, sobering.

Draco moved his face closer. "Is that a promise?" he asked, his lips millimetres from Potter's now.

"Yes." Potter kissed him, deeply, warmly, and that was almost enough. But it wasn't, not with *this* hanging in the air between them, the possibility of being that much closer.

Draco opened his eyes. "Does this seem too fast to you?" he asked carefully, wanting to be absolutely sure. He wasn't stalling for time himself, was he?

Potter's eyes opened, too, and he inhaled slowly. "It's fast," he said, with equal caution, "but I don't know if it's *too* fast. We've both been wanting it for a long time. We only have a month left where we *know* we're together, and after that, who knows what will happen? Dumbledore could send us off in little groups. I might never see you again. You realize that, don't you?"

A sensation like cold wind swept through Draco's chest. It was icy, and made it difficult to think. "I know," he said tightly, lowering his eyes.

"So, I don't know if we really have time to waffle, then," Potter went on, one finger tracing the line of Draco's collarbone. "If we're going to do this - be together, I mean - then we don't have time to waste on uncertainty. We're going to do this sooner or later, right? So, why *not* now? I don't know about you, but I don't want to die a virgin."

Draco laughed reluctantly and nodded. "So that's what this really is," he said, through narrowed eyelids.

"Of course it isn't," Potter said, with a frown. "It's just - all of it. I think we just have to grab at

whatever time we can get together. I really don't know about you, but for me, this is the best thing that's ever happened to me, in my entire life so far, and I want to make the most of it."

Draco didn't respond immediately. They were lying on their sides, facing one another, and for a long moment, Draco just looked at Harry. Eventually, he nodded again. "Yes," he said. "That's just it." He leaned in and trailed his lips over Potter's, not exactly a kiss, but something far gentler and less demanding. "Touch me," he said, his voice just above a whisper.

Harry's hand moved from Draco's collarbone down his chest, to his hip, and then fingers were sliding into the dark-blond curls at the base of Draco's cock. "Do we have any lube?" Harry asked quietly, separating their mouths for a moment.

"Oh. Uh - hold on." Draco fumbled in the small bag beside the bedroll, and drew out a slim tube. Harry raised his eyebrows, and Draco said, too quickly, "Just in case, you know? Notice it's never been opened."

Harry smiled, and took it from him. He rubbed some of the clear, viscous gel onto his fingers, then resumed kissing Draco. His fingers resumed what they'd been doing, too, and carried on massaging Draco's cock. It felt even better with the easy slide of the lube, Draco's brain registered dimly. He shifted onto his back, spreading his legs to make it easier for Harry. Harry's fingers moved across his balls, back toward his perineum, then found his entrance and just rubbed there, for a minute. It was very gentle - incongruously gentle, given the way his lover played Quidditch, say, or lost his temper.

Harry moved his mouth from Draco's, kissing his way down Draco's throat and eventually attaching to his left nipple. Draco moaned softly and tangled Harry's hair between his fingers. Harry's finger pressed against his entrance. "I don't want to hurt you," he said, pausing almost fearfully.

"You won't. Just do it."

A bit of pressure, then the finger eased inside. It felt odd, slightly alien, but not wholly unfamiliar, as Draco had at least tried *this* much on himself before. "Okay?" Harry asked, raising his head to watch him.

Draco nodded. "Yes," he said, a bit more breathily than he'd intended, but it was fine. "You can - you can do more."

Harry nodded seriously and *very* slowly added a second finger. When Draco had adjusted to that, Harry looked up at him, very sober. "How is that?"

Draco's breath hitched, and he felt his muscles clench around Potter's two fingers. "I want you in me," he said, trying to sound relaxed. Pain be damned. It would go away.

"I've heard it's easier if - if you, um, go on your hands and knees," Harry said, biting his lip.

Draco nodded. "Okay."

Harry removed his fingers slowly, and Draco turned himself over. He looked back over his shoulders to see Harry watching him. The ex-Gryffindor moved behind him, then opened the lube and rubbed it over his cock. The sight prompted a reminding twitch from Draco's cock, which had lost a bit of its steam a minute ago. There. Better. Harry knelt behind him. "Okay?"

"Yes. I want this," Draco said firmly, then turned his face back to the back wall of his tent, and waited.

Harry was gentle, pushing in slowly, then waiting until Draco gave the okay, but he was obviously terrified of hurting Draco. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Yes, damn it! You can move. *Please* move!" The warmth of Harry's body was pulsing off him like waves, surrounding Draco, exciting his blood. It all felt remarkably, extraordinarily intimate, beyond what he had even thought it would feel like. He could feel the soft hair around Harry's cock on his arse cheeks, could feel the trembling of Harry's hips as they pushed up against him, the warmth of Harry's hands on his own hips, where they were gripping tightly.

Harry moaned despite himself. "Feels so good," he said, half under his breath. He began to move then, slowly. On his third stroke, he shifted slightly, and hit the place Draco had been rather hoping he would find. Sensation flared inside him and spread rapidly, and Draco let out a gasp he'd been trying to contain.

"Was that - ?" Harry began, his voice seductively breathy. He leaned forward and kissed Draco's spine.

"Yes!" Draco said. "Do it again!" He was completely, *achingly* hard now. Harry, encouraged, started to move a little faster, catching that place on nearly every stroke. The pain was forgotten.

"Draco - I'm sorry - " Harry gasped, a few minutes later, his speed increasing again, "but I don't think I'm going to last long - "

"'S'okay," Draco panted back, dropping his head. It felt so good, he thought he might explode. And *then* Harry reached around and found Draco's cock, which was wet. He jerked his hand toward Draco's body, as though trying to meet his own cock through Draco's torso, and Draco knew that he was seconds away, himself. Harry gasped, incoherent now, and the warmth of his breath his Draco's back and tickled slightly - his hand squeezed, and Draco's hips bucked, come shooting everywhere. Waves of pleasure were gripping his body, and he clenched his jaws and his eyes both to keep himself from screaming. Harry's breathing was growing steadily shallower and shallower, then suspended altogether for a few seconds. Draco felt a warm rush fill him, and Harry was breathing again, still gripping his hips.

They stayed that way for a few seconds, just breathing hard and enjoying the aftershocks of the feeling. After a bit, Harry pulled out of him and collapsed onto the bedroll. Draco let his own weight drop (his arms were trembling anyway, despite the billions of push-up's he'd done over the past month) and curled up on his side - fighting the urge to make a face as he did so.

Harry caught it, though. "Are you alright?" he asked worriedly, even though his voice was still shaky and somewhat hoarse.

"Fuck, yeah," Draco said contentedly, moving closer. "That was amazing."

Harry smiled suddenly. "Was it, for you?" he asked. "I know it was for me, but - "

"Stop worrying," Draco interrupted. "It was great. Really good. I would definitely do it again."

"Does it feel good, the prostate thing?" Harry pressed.

Draco moved his mouth over his lover's, lightly. "Very good," he said. "Was I unclear on that point?"

"No, but I just wanted to make sure," Harry said.

"Well, it feels fucking brilliant," Draco told him. "You'll see." He smiled, and Harry smiled back, obviously relieved.

"Okay." Harry was the one to start the kiss this time, and as their tongues stroked each other's, Draco realized that he hadn't thought of Harry as Potter since sometime earlier, while they'd been discussing whether or not they were ready for this.

Perhaps they hadn't been, but they were there now, and it was wonderful. Draco fell asleep in Harry's arms that night, and reflected hazily that life really wasn't so bad, after all.

A/N: Feedback is really great! Allow me to introduce our friend, the review button. Just down and to your left.

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Chapter: 13

Chapter 13: Sunday

Sunday was a long, lazy day, and Draco loved every minute of it. First, there was waking up. Realizing, for the fourth morning running, that he was not alone. And very much pleased with the circumstances. Harry was sleeping soundly, his mouth open slightly, eyebrows raised peacefully in his sleep. He was curled up on his side, facing Draco, their knees touching. One of his bare feet was tucked between Draco's ankles, and he looked, quite frankly, adorable. Draco smiled to himself, amused, and forgot all thoughts of checking the time. It was Sunday. He watched Harry until he fell asleep again.

The next time he woke, Harry was still asleep, in much the same position, only his legs were stretched out now. Draco woke up hard, and wanted to do something about it. He inched closer to Harry, reached out his tongue, and traced it slowly over Harry's parted lips. Harry made a small sound in his sleep, and his tongue came out to touch Draco's. A thrill of desire coursed through

Draco's body at the contact, and he closed his mouth over Harry's. Harry woke partway into the kiss. Draco expected him to be startled, but Harry just made another small noise in his throat, and began to kiss back, in a slow, dreamy, half-awake state. His eyes open toward the end of it, blinked a few times. "Good *morning*," he said.

"Morning," Draco said casually, returning the smile. Actually, it was more of a smirk, really. He moved quickly, rolling Harry onto his back, leaning over him. He pushed his unclothed erection into Harry's rising one, and kissed his lover again, starting to rub, slowly. There was no rush. Harry moaned, quite loudly, actually. Draco paused, snickered, reached for his wand and renewed the Silencing spell. "If that's the way you're going to be about it…" he said, a thread of tease in his tone.

"Well - if you're going to - " Harry's protest was cut off as Draco's mouth clamped over his again, and instead of complaining, Harry moaned again, into Draco's mouth and lifted his hips off the bedroll. His hands were on Draco's bare arse, squeezing. They kissed and rubbed and moaned for a few more minutes, and then Draco couldn't stand it any more. He found Harry's hand, closed it around both of their cocks, damp with precome, and began to push through the circle of their hands. The friction ate into the ache of pleasure in Draco's belly and spiralled rapidly all the way through him. He came first; Harry a few moments later, biting down on Draco's shoulder to keep himself from crying out.

"Well, *that* certainly improves this whole morning business," Harry said dryly, but he was smiling.

"I agree," Draco said, still breathing hard. He hadn't moved off Harry yet, but was resting, hips propped on Harry's, forearms crossed on the ex-Gryffindor's chest.

"What time is it?"

Draco picked up his wand and cast the spell. "Nearly half-past one."

"That's it?"

"So it would seem."

"I thought you were going to sleep until three," Harry said, not-quite-accusingly.

"No," Draco corrected, smiling. He pinched Harry's nipple playfully - or his version of playfully, at least - Harry's breath drew in rather quickly - "I said I was going to stay in bed until three."

"Ah." Harry understood, and apparently liked it. "Doing much this sort of thing, I presume."

"Quite. I'm so glad you understand."

"What are lovers for?"

"That's an awfully sophisticated word for a Gryffindor," Draco smirked, quirking his eyebrows.

Harry just grinned. "I know. Aren't you proud?"

"I am, actually."

"Enough talk," Harry said suddenly and bossily. "Let's snog."

"Deal."

* * *

They spent the next several hours in the tent together - hiding out, Harry called it. Draco just considered it self-indulgence - not having to be around any person other than the wanted he wanted to be with. Harry had suggested that they leave for supper, eat separately, then go and play Quidditch, and come back to the tent. Draco had agreed to this. Reluctant as he was to share Harry for any of their free time, he knew better than to hold on too hard.

Hedwig returned around half-past two, wings beating against the tent. It was, of course, light out - but she must have known, in her odd, owl-sense way, that Harry was not there, in his own tent. Draco let her in quickly - quite puzzled for, though the hoot had most certainly been Hedwig's, this owl was brown. "What the - " he began, staring.

The eyes were the same, though - round and amber, and slightly accusing. "Hedwig!" Harry exclaimed, holding out his arm to her. She hopped over, and, with a click of her beak and a shake of her wings, turned abruptly white again. "I should have thought," Harry said, his voice with guilt. "I'm sorry, girl!"

Draco sat back on his heels, thoroughly unsettled. "She can change colour?"

"I guess she can," Harry said, shrugging. "I've never seen her do it before, though. When did you learn that, girl?" he asked, petting her.

As though she could even answer, Draco thought, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. Then a silly mood took him. "Last year, Harry," he said, in a high, affected voice. "We covered it in Basic Owl Magic."

Harry burst out laughing. "Quiet, you!" he said. "I am *attempting* to talk to my owl here."

"Good thing she can talk back," Draco said, with a mock-sneer.

"Don't listen to him," Harry said, affectionately knuckling Hedwig's beak. "You're so smart! I should have thought to disguise you. Did Zabini recognize you?"

A sharp beak click. Negative, Draco guessed. "That's good," he said, with relief. "I mean, she's not the only snowy owl in Britain, is she? But still. Most of the Slytherins in my year, at least, knew she was yours."

"Yeah, mine, too," Harry said. "She *was* the only one at Hogwarts." He still sounded miserably guilty. "I should have *thought*. I totally could have been sending her into danger."

"Yeah, well, I didn't think of it, either," Draco said, uncomfortable. "Good thing she's so clever."

Hedwig hooted, sounding pleased, and flapped her way around the tent, turning rapidly from white to brown and back again. "Show off," Draco said dryly.

She flapped him upside the head - quite hard, actually. Harry laughed. "You deserved that," he said.

"Shut up. And get off me, you!" This was directed at Hedwig, who hooted again.

"Do you want to go back to our tent?" Harry asked. "Catch up on your sleep? You've had a long night."

Another hoot, sounding happy. "Can you get in without me, or do I need to come?" Harry asked.

Hedwig gave him a plaintive look. Harry sighed, stood (in a crouch), and pulled his jeans on over his boxers. "Where's my shirt?"

"I don't know," Draco said, looking around for it - not really caring. "Wear one of mine."

"Oh, that would be subtle," Harry said, snorting. "Do you have a red or a black one? I think I was wearing a black one yesterday."

"So you were," Draco said, locating it. It was admittedly difficult to tell Harry's black t-shirt apart from his own, as they were nearly the exact same size. Harry's had a small tear at the bottom, though, and was more wrinkled. "Here."

"Thanks. I'm going to Disillusion myself so that no one notices me," Harry said, grinning at him as he tugged the t-shirt over his tousled hair. He found his wand (under one of the pillows) and hit himself over the head with it. Draco could still see him, but he blended into the background of the tiny interior of the tent. "I'll be right back," he said.

"Okay," Draco said, and watched him go. He heard Harry telling Hedwig to go ahead and wait for him there, so that she wouldn't draw attention to him.

Draco amused himself by cleaning the tent up a little, opening the window screens (erecting an Imperturbable, which would prevent anyone from being able to see inside), and performed another showering spell on himself. Harry returned in less that five minutes, scratching lightly and letting himself in before Draco could respond. "Hi," he said.

"Hello," Draco said, smiling. "Won't you come in?"

"Don't mind if I do. I see you've opened the window-things," Harry said, grinning.

"I thought it was getting a little stuffy."

"Yeah. It reeks of sex in here, actually," Harry said. "Not that I'm complaining." He cast a nervous glance at the windows. "Imperturbed?" he asked, creating a new word.

"Of course."

"Good." Harry divested himself of his shirt again, but left the jeans. "So. Did you miss me?" He sat down, on his knees.

This came with a rakish grin, and Draco couldn't help but smile back. "Of course not," he said, attempting to rescue his dignity. "You were barely gone at all."

"But I bet you missed me anyway."

"Well, maybe a bit." It wouldn't hurt to admit that, would it?

"Good."

* * *

Supper was an odd affair. The twins were there, and called Draco over to them. This time, Granger was nowhere to be seen. Krum was eating sullenly by himself, and Harry was sitting with a very glum-looking Weasel. *Weasley*, Draco reminded himself. *Must learn to refer to lover's best friend as Weasley*. The twins had, apparently, pulled a lavish prank on Shacklebolt, which had earned them further demerits, despite the trainer's amusement at having his tent converted into a tropical aquarium.

"Were there haddock?" Draco asked innocently, even as his thoughts wandered.

Fred gave him a scathing look. "No, Malfoy, you fool - haddock are *freshwater* fish."

"No they're not," George said, frowning. "They live in the Atlantic."

"No, you git - they live in lakes," Fred said, with a very superior look.

George turned to Draco with a pained look. "Tell him, Malfoy," he entreated.

"I actually have no idea," Draco said, truthfully. "And I really don't care, so let's talk about something else."

George laughed. Fred shrugged. "Fine, then," he said moodily. "Who wants to bet that Moody would hex us if we did the same thing to him?"

* * *

"So, what was all that, with Weasley?" Draco asked. The Quidditch pitch was empty; all the other players had straggled off. The Bludgers and Snitch were back in the case alongside the Quaffle, so he and Harry were free to go now, too. They were both tired and sweaty, and Harry hadn't put his shirt back on yet.

"With Ron, you mean?" Harry was walking beside him, letting his fingers swing into Draco's every so often. His t-shirt was draped over his other shoulder.

"Yeah. At supper. Things with Granger not going well?"

"Not really," Harry said, with a sigh. He looked at Draco sideways. "He also suspects, about us," he said ruefully. "He didn't come out and say so, but he knows I've been keeping stuff from him, and he's really hurt about it. Hermione's mad at him because he gets all jealous about Krum - understandably, I'd say - she really needs to make up her mind and stop playing with them, I think. But yeah. Ron's upset about that, and now he thinks you're my new best friend and maybe more."

"Did you tell him?" Draco asked, his brow creasing.

"No," Harry said. He looked up at the sky and exhaled loudly. "I really should."

"How do you think he'll take it?"

"Who knows?" Harry returned, shrugging.

"Does he know you - "

"Prefer men?" Harry finished.

"Yeah."

"I… think so," Harry said vaguely. "We've never really talked about it explicitly, but I'm pretty sure he knows. Hermione knows, obviously, and I'm pretty sure she'd have told him by now."

Draco fell silent, absorbing this. "I see." They walked another few minutes before he asked, carefully, "How do you think he'll react?"

"I don't really know," Harry said. "He'll come around in the end, even if he doesn't like it. I'm not really worried about that, if you're wondering."

I was. Draco just shrugged. "Okay."

They arrived at the row of tents. "Are you still - ?"

"Do you want me to?" Harry asked, fidgeting.

"Stupid question," Draco said, with a quick smile.

Harry smiled back, looking relieved. He bit his lip and nodded. "Okay."

Draco stooped to unzip the tent flap. "After you, then."

Inside, Harry tossed his shirt aside, and turned to Draco, smiling. He opened his mouth to speak, but Draco held up a hand, preventing him. "Wait," he said. "*Silencio!*"

"Right, sorry," Harry said wryly. "Anyway, I was going to say - I hope you're not worried about Ron or anything. I won't let anything like that come between us."

Draco let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Okay," he said.

Harry was standing in the middle part of the tent, which seemed increasingly smaller and smaller with two people in it. "Come here," he said.

To his own surprise, Draco obeyed, let his hands be taken, his mouth drawn to his lover's. The awkwardness of the Weasel-conversation drained away as their tongues met again, as their lips opened to each other's, as the warmth between them pooled and warmed them both. Harry made a small sound in his throat, one that always made Draco's pulse race, and moved his hands down to Draco's arse. Harry moved his mouth away. "I caught the Snitch tonight," he said, his lips brushing against Draco's as he spoke.

"So you did," Draco admitted.

"Without my shirt on."

"Also quite true," Draco said. "You looked damned hot, too."

Harry grinned. "I *am* damned hot," he said cheekily.

"As am I," Draco countered feistily, quirking an eyebrow up.

"Mmm," Harry said, contemplatively. He mouthed a hot kiss onto Draco's neck, using his tongue. "True."

Draco just stood there and let Harry do what he wanted; it felt very good, and he was having difficulty focusing on his witty repartee. He didn't say anything.

"So," Harry went on, sliding his hands under Draco's rumpled t-shirt, "I figured that I should try bottoming for you tonight - to make up for getting the Snitch again."

Gods. Heat flared in Draco's groin at these softly, seductively-toned words, and he couldn't even find the words to offer up a decent retort. "I still win," he said, making up for the lack of witty comment by unbuttoning his lover's jeans and slipping his hand down the front of his boxers.

Harry stifled a moan, eyes half-lidded, and arched into Draco's hand. "I can't get undressed if you do that," he said, voice heavy with desire.

Draco squeezed gently, smirked, then released him. "As you like," he said.

Harry tried to smile back, in an attempt to be casual, but it came out as more of a grimace, missing the pressure of Draco's fingers. He swiftly removed his jeans and boxers both. Draco had, in the mean time, removed his shirt and was working on the rest of his clothes.

"Okay, I can't take this any more!" Harry said suddenly. "No more of this slow nonsense! I need you right now!"

Again, the words went straight to Draco's hardened cock, and he decided that perhaps Harry was right. "Fine," he said.

They moved together, hands reaching, finding, gripping, hips pushing, mouths lipping at each other's, small moans being uttered. Draco eased them down onto his bedroll, hovering over his lover. They continued to rub together, no words being said, just desire rising between them, and pleasure, threatening to consume…

"Stop," Harry panted, trying to push Draco's hand away.

Draco drew his head back to frown at the other. "What?"

"I'm going to come if you keep doing that - and I don't want to, yet." Harry opened his eyes and looked directly into his. "I want to wait until you're inside me."

The desire was biting at him now, and Draco was having a hard time containing himself. "Okay," he said. His voice had gone husky. They found the lube, somehow, and Draco squirted some into his hand. "How do you want to do this?" he asked, uncertain. He'd never done this before, and wanted it to be good for Harry, too.

Harry shrugged, tossing damp hair back from his forehead. "Maybe the same way?" he suggested. "I don't know. Did it hurt you, last time?"

"A little," Draco admitted. "Nothing to do with you; I imagine it just does, until you get used to it. But it really did feel good, after."

"Let's do it that way," Harry decided. He reached for the tube in Draco's hands.

"What are you doing?"

Harry gave him a mischievous look. "You," he said simply. He squeezed out some of the clear substance onto his fingers and grasped Draco's erection with it.

Draco shivered. "Fuck," he said, through clenched teeth. "Mmm - stop that. I'm going to - just - don't."

Another eloquent look. "You get to do me, now," Harry said, and arranged himself on his hands and knees.

Draco took himself a moment just to stare, then positioned himself behind Harry. With his own, lubed fingers, he began to massage the surface of Harry's entrance, while his other hand rubbed circles over the firm cheeks of his arse. Draco stretched him slowly, the way Harry had done the night before, then entered him with a great deal of care. Gods - it felt so good; Harry's arse was

tight, clenching around his cock in little spasms, and Draco was afraid that he really was going to lose it right then. "Fuck," he said again, his voice huskier than before. "Harry - you're so - it feels incredible."

"I know," Harry said, sounding a bit strained.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah - just - give me a second," Harry said, voice muffled as he let his head hang. Draco waited. After a moment, Harry nodded. "Okay. You can move," he said.

"Sure?"

"Absolutely."

Draco pulled out a little, watching the sight of himself entering his lover again. It was quite a sight. He pushed in carefully, but it felt so good - part of him just wanted to throw caution to the wind and to *drive* into Harry, hard and fast, over and over again - but he held himself in check. Tried to remember what Harry had done that - he angled up a little on his third stroke, and Harry's body spasmed again.

"Fuck!" he gasped, his arse squeezing hard around Draco's cock.

Draco moaned. "Was that it?" he panted, almost on the brink of explosion from the need to keep going, keep thrusting…

"Yeah. It's - good, do it again!"

He did not need any further encouragement. Trying to use the same stroke, Draco pushed in again, then again right away. Harry was gasping and hissing - it sounded like it might be Parseltongue, but not words, exactly. "How's that?" Draco asked, needing to hear it -

"*Sssssaaaaakkhhhhaaasssssaaaaiiiaaaa*…." Harry said, and Draco could see that his eyes were squeezed tightly closed. He pushed back against Draco, who was more than happy about it.

"Fucking hell, that's hot, Harry," Draco said tightly, and began to fuck his lover for real. His hands wandered over Harry's muscled back, slipping back to squeeze his arse occasionally, or dipping beneath to finger hardened nipples. He found Harry's face once, and Harry's lips caught his fingers and sucked them into his mouth. Draco couldn't even speak any more, other than gasps and pants. He was so, so close - the pleasure was eating his very flesh away, leaving nothing but bone and exposed soul - he was surging into Harry's body, the warmth of his lover swallowing his cock and spreading warmth throughout Draco's body in return… Draco reached for Harry's cock now, determined to take him with himself over the edge - Harry moaned and pushed into Draco's hand, little choking sounds coming from his throat.

"Yes?" Draco asked roughly, his voice almost hoarse from his desire.

"Yes!" Harry was bucking into his hand now.

Draco let himself go; a few, final hard strokes, and Harry's wet warmth was all over his hand, and Draco's brain was hardly registering it, because he was coming so hard, his brain might have escaped his body then, too. Harry's body took it, accepted the warmth of Draco's release, and shuddered beneath him.

Draco exhaled and they collapsed together onto the bedroll, still joined. Harry was trembling. After a minute, Draco pulled himself out of his lover before his softened flesh could do it on its own, and Harry immediately turned around to face him. "That was amazing," Harry said, voice still breathy.

"I'll say," Draco said lazily. He rolled onto his back and pulled Harry with him. Harry settled his head on Draco's shoulder and sighed contentedly.

"You were right," he said.

"About bottoming?"

"Yeah. It was fucking brilliant."

"Told you," Draco said smugly, but his fingers were winding themselves into Harry's hair

affectionately. "Glad you tried it, then?"

"Definitely." Harry raised his head and smiled down at him. "I'm glad it was with you."

Draco felt oddly touched by this, and was suddenly extremely glad that he hadn't done this with Zabini. "Me, too."

Harry smiled a moment longer, then lowered his face to kiss Draco for a long moment. "Good night," he said, several minutes later.

"Night."

They fell asleep that way, with Harry cradled in Draco's arm.

* * *

Neither of them heard Draco's wand beeping the next morning.

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Chapter: 14

Chapter 14: Caught Out

"Fuck!" Harry exclaimed.

A warm hand came down on Draco's shoulder and shook, but he'd woken with Harry's outburst. "Mmm," was all he could manage.

"Draco, I think we've overslept - what time is it?"

Harry's tone was urgent, and somehow penetrated Draco's foggy senses. He opened his eyes and blinked several times, even as his hand fumbled for his wand. He cast the *tempus*, only to discover to their mutual horror that it was ten minutes past seven - which was starting time for training. "Fuck!"

Harry sat up, horrified, and echoed Draco, reaching for his socks. "Where were you supposed to be this morning?"

Draco located his schedule. "Field Six," he said.

Harry's face turned quite pale. "Me, too," he said. "So are Ron and Hermione. Oh, *fuck* - they're all *totally* going to know!"

"Well, we - "

Draco's voice was cut off by an abrupt scratching at the tent flap. "Mr. Malfoy?" came the clipped tones of Minerva McGonagall. Draco looked at Harry, and they exchanged a swift, agonized look.

"Sorry, Professor, I overslept!" Draco said quickly, his heartbeat surely echoing in his voice. "I'll - I'll be right out!"

"Mr. Malfoy." The stern voice clearly was not going to settle for this. "Open this tent. I want to see for myself."

Another panicked exchange of looks. "Uh - Professor - " Draco tried, a very bad feeling settling heavily into his gut, "I - I'm not really dressed - but if you just give me a second - "

They both knew that Harry couldn't Apparate out; it was one of the forbidden spells. The tents were too small, the instructors said. Besides, anti-Apparation blocks were there for their safety - they prevented anyone from Apparating *in*, too.

"Mr. Malfoy," McGonagall said, patience obviously strained, "please do not take me for a fool.

You have three seconds to open your tent, or I will do it for you."

"No - Professor - please don't - "

Draco's pleas fell on deaf ears. Harry was white beside him, frozen into place. They were naked, and sitting side by side with the covers pulled up to their waists. The sound of the zipper unzipping was followed by the sight of McGonagall's thin, bony hand, which was followed by the sight of her very angry face. There was a long moment while the three of them just stared at one another; Draco and Harry staring miserably at McGonagall, while she glared back.

"So," she said, and a fairly nasty silence ensued. She looked at Harry. "An odd choice of behaviour, Mr. Potter, given your current responsibilities." The cold, dark eyes snapped back to Draco. "And you, Mr. Malfoy - encouraging this. I am disappointed in you both. Get dressed and come with me at once."

Her face disappeared, yanking the zipper down to close the gap. There was another silence. Draco felt simultaneously cold and hot at once - hot with wrath, both at himself as well as at McGonagall - and cold with fear. Harry's face was pale and set, jaw stiff. He pulled his socks on in silence, then reached for his boxers and jeans, spelling both clean before standing up to put them on. The process was repeated on his raggy, black t-shirt, and he ran fingers through his wild hair.

Draco dressed himself slowly and carefully, as though preparing for battle. The fear was eating into him, and he couldn't force it down far enough. He chose a black t-shirt as well (he always wore black on Mondays; it seemed appropriate), and found a comb to rake through his hair. Harry was kneeling, tying the laces of his trainers. "I'm sorry," Draco said stiffly, watching his lover carefully.

Harry didn't look up. "It's not your fault," he said, voice extremely neutral. His hands moved to the other shoe. "I should have been more careful."

Bloody Gryffindor guilt complex! Draco bit back his surge of annoyance, but didn't know what to say instead. So, he said nothing. Harry seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time over his laces, but eventually straightened up, squaring his shoulders. "Don't worry," he said feebly. "It'll be okay."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Will it?" he asked coolly. "Or are you going to beat yourself up

about this, then freak out on me, end this, and prostrate yourself before the instructors?"

He'd chosen the word "prostrate" deliberately because it sounded so much like "prostate", and Harry knew it, and blushed. "I'm not going to freak out on you," he said, face flaming, but didn't quite meet Draco's eye.

Draco wanted to grab him and shake him, hard, but resisted the urge. "Really," he said, doubt lacing his voice thickly.

Harry's lips tightened, and he looked as though he was going to say something different, but changed his mind. "Yes," he said firmly. His eyes flicked up to meet Draco's honestly this time, and he took a step closer and kissed Draco on the lips with equal firmness. He made to pull away, too quickly, but Draco did grab him then, by the shoulders, and pulled Harry in closer. Harry allowed it, and opened his mouth to Draco. They kissed for a long moment, in silence, and then Harry pulled away again. "We need to go," he said softly.

I wish we didn't. I wish I didn't feel like this was my fault, or that you're still going to have regretted this, later. "I know," Draco said, and with that, followed his lover out of his tent.

* * *

The two of them were on one side of the table in the lodge, while McGonagall, Moody, Shacklebolt and Dumbledore sat on the other side. Outnumbered two to one, Draco thought sourly, regarding the entire scene through half-lidded eyes, eyebrows high on his forehead.

Shacklebolt was looking through their files. "Mr. Potter," he said slowly, the black coffee he'd been sipping not helping his morning voice any, "you are listed on record as having already fifty-five demerits. Added to which, your use of a banned spell within a tent which was not even yours." He looked up then, looking quite menacing. "In addition, we have been extremely clear, I think, on the point that romantic entanglements were to be strictly avoided during this two-month period. Please explain yourself."

All the attention, typically, was focused on Harry, who stuttered in the limelight at the best of times. Harry's hands were twisting in his lap, and he stared moodily at them. He didn't answer at once, swallowing several times.

"Mr. Potter?" Shacklebolt prompted, neither gently nor harshly.

Harry opened his mouth and tried to speak, but it was obvious to all present that he didn't know what to say, exactly, and that his emotions were riding high and not particularly well contained. "Well - I - I - didn't mean to - you know - let things get in the way of my training - and I'm not, I don't think, except for this morning - but I - " he broke off and looked at Draco, eyes pleading for help.

"Answer yourself," Moody growled. "You knew it was a rule, and you deliberately broke it. What have you got to say about that?"

Harry's face took on a rebellious look, and he met Moody's mismatched eyes defensively. "I didn't - well, I guess I - I just - "

Draco recrossed his legs, and felt his impatience rise beyond the containable point. "What kind of a question is that?" he interrupted, rudely. "He fell in love, okay? And he tried damned hard to resist this, so if you want to blame me, go right ahead."

"Mr. Malfoy - " Moody attempted to cut in, but the interruption just made Draco angrier.

"Don't interrupt me," he snapped. "You all get to have your boy hero just jump whenever you give the word, and he does. He always does - comes through and saves everyone's arses again. He doesn't complain, he just lets you all keep ordering him around. He *knows* what's on his shoulders. It's only *that* that keeps him around in the first place - fear of letting the entire world down. You could really think about easing off just a little."

This was received in something of a shocked silence. Harry didn't look at him, but slid his left foot over so that it was resting against Draco's right trainer. Draco's face was pulsing heat from his anger, but this little gesture warmed him in a different way. He took a deep breath.

McGonagall cleared her throat. "That will do," she said, her voice cold. "We have known about this relationship since the time of the spell. It was rather obvious. However, we had decided, between ourselves, not to do anything about it lest it interfere with your training. It has been less than a week since the spell took place - we have no way, of course, of knowing when the relationship itself began - but this does not bode well for the remaining month. You have quite of bit of very intensive work left to your training - including, Mr. Potter, potions review, which begins tomorrow - yes, I know - so it would really be in your best interests to focus your energies

on the tasks at hand."

"Not to mention," Shacklebolt put in, "the fact that, come September, we will be sending you out into the field in groups, and I will absolutely *not* guarantee that you will be assigned to the same group. In fact, I think I would avoid it. Any tense situation, really - Granger, Weasley and Krum, as well. It's just not the dynamic we need when it comes to concentrating on working together, and we can't afford to have Potter distracted." He paused for a moment, then added, "None of us can."

Draco glanced at Harry, only to see that his lover was staring at Dumbledore, pleading with his eyes.

Dumbledore glanced at McGonagall, then cleared his throat. "I think," he said, wheezy-voiced (the heat, perhaps?), "that we *are* being rather strict. Your concerns are all quite appropriate, of course, but I rather feel that Mr. Malfoy is correct. Mr. Potter most certainly does indulge us with our - need - for him, and has been working very hard. This habit of oversleeping has been an ongoing one since the beginning of training camp, and I do not think it can be blamed on his recent - interactions - with Mr. Malfoy."

Shacklebolt looked pained. "So, you're suggesting that, yet again, we make an exception for the Boy-Who-Lived."

Dumbledore merely lifted white brows. "Why not? He *is* an exception. His entire life has been one. He works harder and faces more than any of us can hope to. Why not let this go, Kingsley?"

Shacklebolt looked rather irritated, but Moody appeared mollified. "Well, that is true," he agreed reluctantly. "I suppose Potter's entitled to *something* of a life of his own." He looked at Shacklebolt. "What do you think?"

Shacklebolt looked at Dumbledore. "It's your decision, of course," he said, sounding very much like he wished it were his.

"It is *your* training program," Dumbledore responded, politely. "But if you left it with me - I do not have a problem with it."

Silence. Then a mighty sigh from Shacklebolt. "Fine," he said. He fixed both Harry and Draco

with a glare and a point of one long finger. "But I expect you both to work all the harder, and I expect you to sleep in your own tents. What you do in your spare time is your decision. I hope you'll use your time wisely. And Potter - *try* to be on time in the mornings, alright?"

Harry nodded meekly. Draco just nodded.

"You may go. Your group - " Shacklebolt checked his watch - "should be on Field Eleven by now. Stealth review, with Dawlish."

They stood. "Thank you," Harry mumbled, mostly to Dumbledore. The latter gave them each a quick smile, and also stood.

"I will walk you part of the way there," he said. He turned back. "Thank you, Kingsley," he said, in that same, infuriatingly-polite tone. Then he ushered them out.

Outside, Dumbledore fell into step beside them. "Thank you, sir," Draco said finally, after a few moments.

"What? Oh, certainly," Dumbledore said, almost airily. "I just wanted to tell you both that, although Shacklebolt was quite likely right to be after you for breaking one of his rules, I quite approve of this relationship and think it will do you both well. However, following rules has certainly never been a strong point for either of you, so I am hardly surprised. Having said that, let me adjure you both to do just as Shacklebolt said: work hard, boys. Very hard. This camp is just the warm-up to something much bigger, and you both need to be very prepared. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Harry said quickly.

"Yes," Draco said, only after Dumbledore had looked questioningly at him. "Of course. But - "

"What?" They'd all stopped walking. Dumbledore's keen, blue eyes were piercing.

Draco wanted to ask about September, and being sent away in different groups, and felt sure that Dumbledore knew that what he wanted to ask, but couldn't get the words out. "Never mind," he said at last.

Another swift, seeing look, and a tiny nod. "Alright," Dumbledore said, simply. "I will take my leave, then. Hurry on to your training, then."

"Yes, sir."

Dumbledore turned and strode back toward the lodge.

They were just crossing the back of Field Three, where a group could be seen duelling in the distance under Hooch's watchful gaze. Harry turned to him. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't go thinking that I think you can't defend yourself," Draco said warningly.

"I don't. I - "

"Even if you *are* bollocks at it," Draco interrupted, finishing his thought. He smirked at Harry's expression of outrage.

"You - !!"

They were nearing a belt of trees between Fields Three and Four, and Harry grabbed his arm and pulled him into it. Draco didn't resist in the least. In seconds, Harry had him pushed up against a tree, and was crushing their mouths together. Draco didn't resist this, either - only, a tiny, niggling bit of guilt was tugging at the back of his mind. After several minutes of wet, furious kissing, Draco forced himself to separate his tongue from Harry's. "Hey. We really have to get going."

Harry nodded, breathing heavily. "I know we do."

"I don't want to, either."

"It's my *birthday*," Harry said, looking stubborn. "It would be so great if, just for once, I could do *fun* stuff on my birthday."

Draco knew better than to shove his hips forward, which would only prompt something they didn't have time to finish, but he still said, "Well, you get to do *me* later, and I'm definitely fun. So, for now, suck it up, lover-boy."

Harry glared, or tried to. "Rather suck you," he mumbled, but released Draco's shoulders and turned to keep going."

Trying very hard to ignore the heat burning in his crotch at these words, Draco followed, and successfully resisted the urge to catch up to Harry, shove him down to his knees, and get him to do just that. He *did* take Harry's hand, though, which he'd never done before, just casually, like that. He held it until they reached Field Four, when he let go. Harry gave him a quick smile, and when they got to the next belt of trees, it was Harry who reached for Draco's hand first.

They repeated this pattern until they'd reached Field Eleven, emerging from the trees a careful few feet apart.

However, it was not enough to convince Weasley, apparently, who was staring at them both - and Harry in particular - as though he'd been utterly betrayed. His face was devastated. Granger caught their eyes and made a face that suggested there was nothing she could do about it. Harry swore under his breath. He began to walk more quickly, putting space between himself and Draco, but when he reached the Weasel's side, the obnoxious redhead turned away, arms crossed. Harry stopped, at an apparently loss - and nothing more could happen then, because Dawlish had noticed their presence then and was talking. It would have to wait until later.

* * *

And wait until later it did. Harry and the Weasel had a spectacular row in the lodge after dinner that night. Nobody knew what it was about, because they'd waited until everyone had left, then Silenced the whole of the lodge. Or Harry had, at least, Draco thought, narrowing his eyes at the thought of the other option - who knew if the Weasel could even muster spells that strong? He sat outside his tent in the cooler air of the early evening, and waited for it to be over. *He* knew what it was about, and was more apprehensive than he cared to let himself think about the outcome. If there was one person in the world who could truly turn Harry away from him (besides Harry himself, of course), then it was his best friend. Curse the Weasley and his entire *clan*. Well, not the twins, perhaps. They were alright.

Granger appeared after a bit, her face looking both cross and worried. She presented herself in front of Draco and asked if she could sit down.

Feeling thoroughly miserable and hating that she must know it, Draco just waved carelessly toward the grass, not speaking.

"They've been in there for more than an hour now," Granger reported anxiously, with a horribly unsubtle, Gryffindor-ish look of open worry.

"Yes, they have," Draco answered, breathing through his nose and willing himself to be polite.

A sudden look. "I'm sorry, you must be - " she began, but her sentence died at the look on his face.

"Don't finish that," Draco said, fairly pleasantly, he thought.

A slightly more guarded look came over Granger's face, and she stiffened a little. "I just thought, as we're maybe the only two people who know what they're fighting about - well, I don't know."

Draco stayed morosely silent for several minutes. Dusk was settling in. "Do you think Weasley will convince him to ditch me?" he asked at last, his tone harsh.

Granger heaved a sigh. "I don't know," she said. "But they wouldn't be happy with me if I went in there now."

"Would you risk it?" Draco asked abruptly. "If it meant making Harry happy?"

Granger looked surprised. "Do you think he would be happier with you than with Ron?"

"I'm not asking him to choose between us."

"But Ron might be."

"Well, he's an idiot if he does," Draco said angrily. "There's no reason this has to affect their friendship at *all*."

"*I* know that," Granger said. "But they might not. It's just - I can't talk to Ron right now."

Draco grunted. "Still agonizing between him and Krum, then? I hate to say it, Granger, but you've got absolutely lousy taste in men."

She glared, now. "Not all men can be you and Harry, you know!" she snapped. "I happen to like them!"

"Both of them."

"Well - " Granger waffled. "I just can't tell who I like more."

"I don't really see how it can be that difficult," Draco said, aware that he was being rather rude and not giving a shit about it. "You've known Krum for how long? Three years. He's a bloody good Quidditch player, a pretty good student, and that's about it. You've known Weasley since our first year, been friends with him since then, which to me, at least, would suggest that you're tolerably fond of his company - why, I don't know, but that's just me - and you've been playing games with them since fourth year. It's always been obvious to me that you like Weasley and can't get your act together with him - no thanks to his bumbling obliviousness, either - but now you're all confused. I don't get it."

Granger was breathing heavily, obviously upset with him, but her brain was too busy digesting what he'd said to muster any sort of retort. She was silent for several minutes, which was a welcome relief. It was almost long enough for Draco to resume brooding about his own circumstances when she finally *did* respond. "I don't think you're being particularly fair to either of them," she said at last.

Draco gave her a particularly condescending smirk. "Well, that makes two of us, then," he said smugly, knowing that it would sting her.

It did. Granger looked quite taken-aback. "You're a bastard!" she snapped. "You know that, right?"

"Sure I do," Draco said, completely unbothered by this. "It's part of my charm."

"Maybe Ron's right to be discouraging Harry for being with you!" Granger looked as though she were going to stand up and huff off, but for whatever reason, she didn't.

"Don't go saying stuff like that," Draco snarled. "He's happier with me than he's been in years, and you know it. At least, you do if you're any sort of real friend."

Granger struggled with this for a moment, then accepted it. "Fine. Yes, he is. But - "

"Then don't you even dare think about suggesting we not do this!"

"Alright, alright, I won't. Happy? But you could stand to be a *bit* less of a git to the rest of us, from time to time, you know. I mean, obviously you're nicer to Harry, or I can't see what he would see in you at all."

"Flattering, Granger," Draco said breezily. "But I'll just take this opportunity to point out that I was - and have been - completely un-antagonizing for the entire month of July, and absolutely no one except for Harry and the Weasley twins have been nice to me at *all*. In fact, until I got paired off with the twins for training, I don't think that anyone really even talked to me. Except," he added grudgingly, "for you, that one time."

A long, scrutinizing gaze followed this. "I suppose you're right," Granger conceded.

"I know I am." Draco just smirked again.

"So, you think I should go in there and try to straighten them out?"

"Can't hurt, can it?" Draco kept the vulnerability from his voice, but only just.

"Okay, I'll go," Granger said, with another sigh. She got to her feet, and it occurred to Draco that she'd only been looking for someone to confirm her initial thought that she *should* go in and

interrupt the fight. Women. Honestly. Draco also wondered, uneasily, if there was something he could do in return for the favour, which wouldn't be too unbearable. Then he thought of it.

"Hey. Granger."

She turned back. "What?"

"While you're in there - just mack on Weasley already, okay? It'll do you both a world of good - *and* it'll take his mind off Harry and I."

Granger met his cool gaze evenly. After a long moment, she nodded. "Maybe I will," she said, and walked off.

* * *

It was very late. Past midnight. Draco was curled on his side and trying to go to sleep, trying to forget the fact that he was alone. Harry hadn't come. He didn't know what had happened with Weasley and Granger, but the fact was that Harry hadn't come.

Draco didn't know what to make of it, exactly, but the fear had gotten its teeth into Draco's very bones. *I don't need him. I don't need anyone.* He hugged his knees to his chest and shivered. *Yes, I do. I need him.*

It was past two when he finally drifted into an uneasy, unhappy sleep.

* * *

Draco woke up when a warm body crawled into bed beside him. He opened his eyes, a rush of gladness coming over him.

"Sorry I took so long," Harry whispered, before attaching his mouth to Draco's.

Draco kissed back, more relieved than he'd ever been in his life before - *embarrassingly*

relieved, in fact - but he had to ask. He drew his head away after a few moments. "Where were you?"

"In my tent," Harry said, simply. "Until it occurred to me that I don't give a flying shit about Kingsley and them, and that if Dumbledore's okay with it, then great. But I had to be here. I would have come. I just had to - work some things out, in my head, first."

"What about Weasley?" Draco couldn't keep the question back.

A strained look came over Harry's face. "I think he'll come around," he said. He sounded, upon reflection, exhausted.

"How are - what's going on with him and Granger?"

"Not sure," Harry said. "They were talking when I left."

"Well, that's something," Draco said. "What time is it?"

"Past three. I know," Harry said, at the look on Draco's face. "It's really late. Can you set your wand to be louder, or something?"

"You're going to be really tired tomorrow." Draco reached for his wand and adjusted it accordingly.

"I know. I don't care. I had to work things out."

"And have you?"

"I think so."

"Good." Draco moved over and kissed him. They were close enough that each could feel the other's cocks swell, touching each other's. Harry moaned softly into his mouth. Draco reached between them, found Harry's cock and began to rub. Harry's hand was there, too, in a confusion

of fingers and heat and *need*, and they were kissing and stroking each other.

"Is this okay?" Harry asked, during a breath. "I think I'm too tired for - "

"This is perfect," Draco said firmly, and pulled Harry back to himself.

And it was. Their moans were muffled by each other's mouths, and the twisting heat was incredible, working its way through Draco's flesh and into his very mind, taking over every other conscious, rational thought, and he was coming into Harry's hand, hips jerking forward, spasming as his cock spurted white heat across them both. Harry was moaning harder now, pushing himself into Draco's hand, pushing, until he came, too, thighs trembling, spreading to get more purchase in Draco's grasp.

After a bit, Draco found his wand and cleaned them both, and that was it - they both fell asleep after that, tired, but sated. And peaceful. Draco was nearly convinced that Harry would stay.

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Chapter: 15

Chapter 15: Enter Snape

Morning, as always, came too early. Draco's wand was making enough noise to rouse the entire camp, and he shut it off irritably. *Fucking mornings.* He rolled over again and came face to face with Harry.

Oh. Right. Harry. A reluctant smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Somehow, he'd managed to forget that. Harry was sleeping *quite* peacefully, giving absolutely no indication whatsoever that he'd heard the alarm going off. The night before was still fresh in Draco's mind, and he was glad all over again - ridiculously so - that Harry was *there*, in his tent. In his bed. With him.

"Hey." Draco put his palm against Harry's warm, bare chest, and pushed. "Wake up. Harry."

Harry gave a slow, deep sigh, and his eyelids flickered briefly. Draco waited. Nothing. "Harry!" he said, louder.

Harry's eyes flew open. "What?" he asked, in evident alarm. "Are we late again?"

Slightly startled, Draco stopped shaking him. "No," he said. "Relax. Do you always wake up in a panic like that?"

Harry rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Only sometimes," he said. His voice was scratchy. "I don't normally oversleep all the time, either. I must be extra tired this month, or something."

"It's August, as of today," Draco told him, and found his wand to conjure coffee. Fatigue was settling heavily into his limbs and he did not think that he could function even remotely without caffeine, and lots of it. He handed a cup to Harry, who accepted it gratefully.

"Thanks."

They sipped in companionable silence for a minute. Then Harry asked, "What time is it?"

"Six-thirty," Draco answered.

"Too early," was Harry's verdict.

"Agreed."

"I'm sorry about yesterday."

"What are you apologizing for, exactly?" Draco stifled a yawn.

"Everything," Harry said vaguely. "All that, with the instructors, and then the stuff with Ron. I'm just - I'm sorry I'm not - I don't know, easier to be with, or something."

"Listen," Draco said, after a slight pause. "I don't care how hard it is. We both knew that we're not exactly your stereotypical, ideal couple. All I want is for us to keep going, okay? I don't give a *shit* about what Weasley thinks of it, although I wish it wasn't so complicated for you."

"He'll be fine," Harry said immediately. "He will. He always comes around. It was just a lot for him to deal with at once - first, he's upset about Hermione, and feels like he's lost one of his best friends. Then he founds out that his *other* best friend is not only gay, but sleeping with his - well, *you*, and finally, that said best friend didn't even tell him about it - he's hurt, is all. But after he stopped yelling, we managed to talk for a bit, and he's still upset. But then Hermione came in and stuff, and it's better now, I think. Or it will be. I just have to give him a little time. And then I just had to think about some stuff myself, and I'm fine, too. Okay?"

Draco just looked at him for a minute. "Okay," he said slowly.

"I'm not giving up on this. Not for anyone," Harry said firmly.

"I love you, you know," Draco said suddenly, and hadn't even meant to. Harry looked a little surprised. Draco was a little embarrassed at his outburst, but when on, face warm. "I do. I just - I don't know. I thought I should say so."

There was a moment's pause. Then Harry Vanished the remains of his coffee and the cup, took Draco's from him and set it down, then put both of his hands on sides of Draco's face to kiss him, very slowly and gently. Draco released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, and relaxed into the kiss. They were sitting up, side by side, and Draco let himself fall back, drawing Harry down with him. Harry pulled his mouth away and stroked Draco's hair. "I needed to hear that," he said, voice soft. "I knew - but it's good to hear it."

"Good to know you're not risking all that for nothing?" Draco asked shrewdly, lips still wet from Harry's mouth, which was even warmer than usual, and tasted like coffee.

"Well - " Harry started, then gave in. "Not exactly, but sort of. I knew it wasn't for nothing. And I'm not worried about the rest of them."

"What if Weasley didn't come around?" Draco asked, watching Harry's expression closely.

Harry shook his head. "I don't want to think about that. We don't need to, so let's not."

Draco accepted it. For now, at least. "Okay." He pulled Harry's mouth to his again.

"What - time - is it?" Harry asked, between kisses.

Draco checked. "Quarter to."

Harry slid his hand between them to cup around Draco's most-of-the-way-hard erection. "How close are you?" he asked, eyes narrowing seductively.

Draco pushed into the ex-Gryffindor's hand unabashedly. "Very, if you keep doing that," he said lazily, smiling.

Harry smiled back and reached for Draco's hand, placing it on himself. "Good. Let's not waste time, then."

Harry's mouth attacked him, and Draco needed no further encouragement. They kissed frantically, moaning into each other's mouths, even rolling over a few times. There was no time for words, just thrusting hips and hot, wet cocks and hands moving together in a rhythm that seemed intimately familiar already. Harry gave a sound that was almost akin to a whine, and came lushly. Draco didn't even wait until the spurting come had stopped before he rolled them over again and lost himself fucking Harry's hand, imagining that he was fucking his lover for real. "Ahh!" he gasped, and felt his own release gush forth. Harry lay panting beneath him, face flushed and damp.

After only a short moment, then reluctantly disentangled themselves and scrambled into their clothes, cleaning as they went. Draco gulped down the rest of their coffee, and they shoved their feet into worn trainers and jogged to Field Nine for potions review - approximately ten yards apart, as though that would fool anyone. Still. It was better than nothing, Draco told himself. They passed the last belt of trees separating themselves from the field, and arrived to discover none other than Severus Snape, who was standing over a steaming cauldron and wearing a very odd expression, indeed.

* * *

"Wait!" Draco grabbed Harry's wrist and prevented him from adding the syrup of hellebore prematurely. He snuck a glance at Snape even as Harry apologized. Snape had seen it; his lip was curling unpleasantly. Draco looked away quickly and returned to the potion. Ernie Macmillan was still blathering on about his Potions NEWT and other such things. Draco had long ago tuned him out. It was becoming a fairly accepted concept that they would be assigned in the field in groups of three or so, and the training groups were routinely being divided in the same way. Weasley and Granger were at the other cauldron, with a whining Zacharias Smith in tow. It had been Macmillan or him, so they had chosen Macmillan.

Under any other circumstances, Draco knew that Snape would have been surprised that Harry had not gone with the Weasel and Granger. However, the look on his face upon their arrival had said otherwise - it said that he knew already, and had not yet decided on what, precisely, he felt about the entire development. Draco suspected that his former head of House was torn between being satisfied that Draco had taken his advice and befriended Harry, his disgust at what the relationship *actually* was, a desire to oppose anything that Harry wanted, and a desire to oppose the other members of the faculty, just to be contrary - as was his wont. He was currently at his own cauldron, where he was apparently making the same thing - Veritaserum, naturally. They had been told that they would need to have it on them at all times, and know how to make it in a pinch - although Snape had lied to Umbridge about it taking a full moon cycle to mature, the stuff *did* take several hours, and the longer it took one to prepare the ingredients, the longer the brewing process, as well. And then the bloody stuff had to simmer for hours within its container, and if the container was contaminated in some way, then it could interfere with the potion's potency.

"… so then I had put in the dung beetle wings, but I forgot to stir it *exactly* three times," Macmillan's voice was droning, with the half-lidded look of a constant talker completely unaware of the fact that his intended audience had long since stopped listening. "But it turned out alright, because - "

"Ernie, can you give it a rest?" Harry asked, frustratedly running his fingers through his hair. "I'm having enough trouble concentrating here!"

Macmillan's eyes opened fully, annoyed. Before he could speak, though, Draco interrupted. "Are done slicing the Doxy eyes yet?" he asked. "We need them in about three minutes here."

"What? Oh - I - yeah. Here." Macmillan got up and made to put the finely-diced Doxy eye bits into the potion.

"Not *now*, you moron," Draco said harshly. "Did you not hear me say 'in about three minutes'? *Gods*!"

Harry gave him a slightly reproachful look, and Macmillan looked stung, but neither protested. Harry had acquiesced immediately and gratefully to Draco's superior knowledge of potion-brewing, and while Macmillan had gone somewhat sulky over the entire affair, his attitude of superiority did not *quite* outweigh his desire to get the potion right. Hence, Draco was in charge. And if Draco had let Macmillan put the Doxy eyes in too soon, they would have had to start from scratch, and they'd already been at this for an hour.

"Now?" Harry asked, a few minutes later.

Draco checked the potion's consistency. It was a hazy, light blue. Perfect. "Now," he said, with a nod to Macmillan.

The Doxy eyes were added with far more flourish that was really necessary, and nearly resulted in losing some of the pieces on the dried grass around the cauldron. Draco caught Harry's eye and bit his tongue. The potion turned light green, which was the intended effect. Good. Snape came over then and peered in. He seemed to be trying to avoid direct eye contact with Draco and Harry both. He made a small mark on his clipboard and turned to move away.

"Does it look right?" Macmillan asked hurriedly, before Snape could go.

Snape stopped and turned back. "Macmillan," he said through his nose, with an air of strained patience, "I would hardly have declined to comment on the fact if it were not. Be thankful that you have Malfoy here. I saw your attempt to ruin the potion a moment ago, with the Doxy eyes."

Macmillan looked hurt. "I wasn't trying - "

"No, and that is the whole point, is it not? Continue." Snape swirled his cloak around him and went off.

How could he *wear* that thing in the middle of the morning on a hot summer's day, Draco found himself wondering. He was also vaguely disappointed that Snape hadn't said anything to him. Right. Probably more disgusted than anything else, then. Draco shrugged it off and tried to pretend that he didn't care, that Snape's approval hadn't meant as much as it ever had to him,

throughout his youth.

Harry caught his eye again and gave him a half-smile. "He'll come around," he said quietly, so that Macmillan wouldn't hear. "Trust me. He's always liked you."

How had he known? "It was different, in Slytherin," Draco said, shrugging. "You saw him at his warmest during our Potions classes. It was never anything more than that. He liked me because I'm a good student, nothing more. And now - " he glanced at Macmillan, whose head was buried in an old textbook from sixth year - "I don't know."

"It's probably a surprise to him, too, that's all," Harry said. "Give him some time to adjust. He's probably still relieved that you've joined this side of the war, still."

Perhaps. True or not, it did make Draco feel a little better. He gave Harry a quick smile, then returned his attention to stirring the potion. "Okay."

* * *

On their way to lunch, Draco noticed Harry lagging behind Ron and Hermione, who were talking in low, intense voices, and dropped back to fall into pace beside him. "They were clearly having 'couple' talk," Harry said, by way of explanation.

"So, are they together, then?" Draco asked, curious about how it had gone.

"I'm not sure, but I think so," Harry said, squinting his eyes in thought, focused on his best friends. "Seems like it, at least. I don't know if it's official or anything, but they were in there, in the lodge, talking for a really long time last night. I hope they figure stuff out soon."

"Maybe Granger will take Weasley's mind off us," Draco said tersely, hoping very much that this was the case.

"Yeah, I hope so," Harry said.

"What happened, exactly? With Weasley, I mean," Draco asked.

Harry took a deep breath. "Well, I mean, it was a lot for him. He never even suspected that I wasn't into girls in the first place, and then to have it be you - he was just surprised. And, with everything going so shitty with Hermione, I guess he thought he was losing both his best friends at once. So, I told him that you and I have nothing to do with him and I being friends, and vice-versa. He seemed to think that I was going to make him be friends with you, too."

Draco couldn't contain his curiosity. "And - what did you say then?"

Harry let his knuckles brush against Draco's as they walked. Probably deliberately. "I said, of course not. I mean, he's going to have to deal with the fact that you're going to be around - just like you have to deal with the fact that I'm friends with him. Only, you knew that when you got into this. He didn't. That's one of the things he said, that he'd never signed on to being friends with a pouf who was dating Draco Malfoy." He laughed, then sighed.

Draco's anger flared up at this, but he refrained from saying anything. Harry went on. "But I straightened him out on that bit, and he seems to be fine. He's a stubborn person, but he's a good friend. Loyal. He would never just ditch seven years of friendship because he didn't approve of who I was dating."

"Is it mostly a problem because it's me, or is he a raging homophobe?" Draco asked, eyes narrowed at the ex-Gryffindor.

Harry shrugged philosophically. "Could be a bit of both, I suppose. I guess he hasn't figured it out, with Percy, yet. He's a bit blind that way. But he means well, he really does. And you have to chalk some of it up to how miserable he's been about Hermione. I mean, he's liked her for a *really* long time."

"Yeah, that can't feel good," Draco admitted, sighing. He never thought he'd find it in his cold, little heart to feel sorry for the Weasel.

They were crossing the last glade of trees, between Fields Two and One; the narrow footpath was really only wide enough for one, but Harry had stopped. "You just said something nice about Ron," he said, smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Don't rub it in," Draco said snidely.

Harry put his hands on Draco's waist and leaned his forehead against Draco's. "You're not half the prat you try to be. You know that, don't you?"

"Quiet, Potter, you'll blow my cover."

"That's not all I'll blow," Harry murmured, and began kissing Draco's neck.

"Oh, *fuck*, Harry - don't do that, or you'll have to deliver, like right now," Draco warned, closing his eyes anyway. His fingers were gripping Harry's upper arms.

"Maybe after lunch, then," Harry said, and transferred his mouth to Draco's. "Thanks. For being nice about Ron, I mean."

Draco kissed him again. "Don't go thinking it'll happen all the time," he said lightly. "Come on. Your friends will think I've kidnapped you and sold your arse to Voldemort if we don't get to lunch."

Harry heaved a sigh. "You're right."

"Besides," Draco added, from behind him, "I'm trying not to be a distraction."

Harry's voice drifted back over his shoulder in a laugh. "That, my sweet-arsed friend, is one thing you'll never *not* be."

* * *

Supper was over. Draco considered the entire affair to have been, on the whole, successful. They had all sat together tonight - Harry, him, Granger, the Weasel, and the twins. The twins. Draco was devoutly grateful that they'd been there - not just at supper, but at the entire camp, thus far. They simply had a way of lightening any charged atmosphere with their humour, wit, and general… Draco didn't know the word. The quality that simply made people good to be around. They had it. He wondered what it took, to be like that. How one learned. Not that he could imagine himself being a buffoon, but the twins were both eminently likeable, as well as

intelligent, loyal friends, full of their own, unique charisma.

Weasley had even asked Draco to pass the potatoes. Granted, he'd turned a dull, brick-red while doing so, and wouldn't meet Draco's eye, but he'd still done it. And from the way Harry beamed at the stupid Weasel afterward, Draco knew he'd only done it to make Harry happy. Well, it had worked, so that was one thing. For no particular reason, during dessert, Harry had suddenly grabbed his hand under the table and squeezed it particularly strongly. Draco had squeezed back, clumsily, rather unused to this oddly childish, but sweet little move on his lover's part, and turned toward Harry. Harry just grinned at him, and took another bite of treacle tart before releasing his hand. He seemed full of a bouncy, contagious energy, and in a very good mood. Toward the end of the meal, a few minutes later, Harry had leaned over and asked if he could come by later. Draco nodded before the question was all the way out of Harry's mouth, and he sensed, rather than saw, Harry's smile that time.

Weasley had been staring at them when Harry moved away again, but then Harry got his attention and they got up to leave, talking about the Quidditch teams for the next night's game. Draco finished his water and got up to leave, as well. Draco moved toward the door when a voice caught his ear.

"Malfoy."

He knew that voice. Draco turned, slowly, breathing deeply, to find Snape standing only a few paces from the door. He must have walked right by the professor, lost in thought. "Hello."

"Do you have a few minutes?" Snape asked, dark brows lifting coolly.

Draco shrugged. "Sure, nothing else to do," he said.

Snape's lip curled, but he said nothing. He turned and walked through the door, clearly expecting Draco to follow him. Which he did. Snape led them across Field One to the staff tent. It was empty; the staff were all still in the lodge. Snape indicated that Draco should sit, so he did, feeling rather uncomfortable. This was almost determined to be unpleasant. He crossed one leg over the other, at the knee, and waited.

Snape was eyeing him. "So," he said.

Draco waited. When it became evident that nothing further was forthcoming, and that Snape was waiting for him, he said, "So, what?"

A brief look of annoyance flickered across Snape's sallow features. "Do not test my patience. You know very well what we are here to discuss."

"Right, because I'm omniscient," Draco retorted, his own annoyance rising. "Well, I can certainly guess, but why you think we should talk about it at all is beyond me."

"Yes, I am certain that it is," Snape snapped. "However, I am attempting to think of your best interests here, Malfoy."

"Right," Draco said, voice somewhere between distrusting politeness and a sneer.

The dark brows arched at this. "I fail to understand why you would willingly enter into a - *relationship* - " he drew out the word as though it were distasteful - "of some sort with a person with whom you have, rather famously, I might add, not gotten along with for the past seven years. While knowing full well that relationships of this nature are prohibited by the staff here, and also that both yourself and Potter have rather larger things to be worrying about than your - " Snape's eyes flicked scornfully down toward Draco's waist, or thereabouts - "personal satisfaction," he completed, sneering.

Again the spurt of impatient temper. Draco bit it back. "First of all," he ground out, "*I* fail to see how this is any of your concern, to start with. We're getting to our training sessions. We're working hard. I'm not letting anybody down, not yet, at least, and as far as I can see, neither is he. But if you want to get into it, then fine. *You* told me to try getting along with him. At the time when you first said that, he and I had already started with the beginnings of where we're at now. It was rough and rather tense, but now we've finally gotten our - act - together - " Draco narrowly avoided swearing in front of his former head of House - "it's rather nice, actually. I was totally alone before, when we were still not getting along. I think we were both far more distracted by each other before this happened, and that things are really much better for everyone concerned, now. I don't see why it's such a big deal for everyone."

Snape met his eyes. "When I told you to consider getting along with Potter, I was thinking more along the lines of ceasing to plot his untimely demise, not - "

"Not what?" Draco challenged, his tone cool. He didn't pull his gaze from Snape's, but met the

other's evenly. "I hope you're not going to say something horrifically homophobic here that's going to make me lose all of my respect for you."

Snape stopped, mouth halfway open, and closed it again. There was a brief pause. Then - "I would not dream of it," he said stiffly.

"Good," Draco said, tossing his hair back from his eyes. "Glad to hear it. Was there anything else?" He made as though to stand.

Snape glared. "Sit!"

Draco resumed his seat.

"Just because you have graduated does not give you the right to speak to me disrespectfully," Snape spat. "You will obey me."

Draco nodded. Fine. Whatever. "Yes, sir."

"I was not finished. Reluctant as I am to accept this - relationship - with Potter, I concede your point that it was probably more distracting before. Allow me to merely adjure you to make decisions regarding your time and your energies with intelligence and judiciousness." Draco nodded, and Snape went on. "Secondly, Dumbledore asked me to speak with you."

"About what - sir?" Draco re-crossed his legs.

"Spying." The word bore into Draco's skull with considerable weight, as Snape's dark gaze pinned Draco to his seat.

"Spying?" He could only repeat the word. The images it conjured up were manifold, and mostly unpleasant. Draco's insides gave a distinctly unpleasant twist.

"Yes, Malfoy. As I do. Dumbledore has asked me to tutor you in this respect, if you are willing."

It was a challenge, but Draco was not sure he was ready to meet it. "Uh, what would it involve?" he asked, hesitating.

"Numerous things. Mostly accompanying me on missions and acting as my back-up." Snape waited.

"Could I… have a little time to think about it?" Draco asked, trying to buy time.

Another flicker of annoyance, as Snape undoubtedly realized that Draco would want to talk it over with Harry. "Fine," he said, just this side of harshly. "You may have three days. No more. Then we need to either start, or I have to find someone else. I would prefer you."

"Why me - sir?"

Surprisingly, Snape gave him a wry, twisted bit of a smile. "Look around, Malfoy," he said. "You are the only Slytherin here. Enough said."

Draco smiled back, reluctantly. "True enough."

Snape leaned forward. "While you are considering, do me a favour." It was not exactly a request.

Draco nodded. "What?"

"Keep an eye on Krum for me."

"Krum?" Draco echoed. "Why him? He seems alright. A little thick, a little clueless, maybe - and he doesn't seem to know the difference between regular magic and Dark stuff - but otherwise - " he broke off, staring at Snape.

"Just watch him," Snape instructed. He leaned back again. "That is all for now. I will be here for the duration of the month, should you need to find me. You may go."

Draco stood. "Thank you, sir," he said, and headed for the door. When he got there, though, he

stopped. Turned back. "I know you probably don't want to hear this," he said quietly, "but I'm really happy with Harry. Honestly. It's the best thing that's ever happened to me." He forced himself to meet Snape's eyes.

There was an awkward silence. Eventually, Snape said, "Good."

Draco nodded, then left.

* * *

"Do I still get to *do you* tonight?"

Harry's hands were massaging his shoulders, and it felt better than it should, by all rights. Draco's eyes were closed, and he moaned appreciatively. "What?"

"Yesterday, you said," Harry said, thumbs digging into that tight, sore place between Draco's shoulder blades. "It was my birthday. You said that you were fun, and that I could, and I quote, do you."

"Ah." Draco remembered. "So I did." It seemed that his cock remembered, too, and gave a happy twitch at these words. Draco rolled onto his back, which was nicer for his trapped erection, anyway. Harry was sitting back on his heels, hands on his hips, waiting for Draco to respond. "Okay," Draco said, and Harry grinned.

"Really?"

"Why not? It's your turn, anyway. And like you said - it was your birthday yesterday, and we didn't have time."

Harry looked gratifyingly excited. "Okay!"

Draco struck his sexiest pose, lowered his eyelids partway, and asked, "How do you want me?"

Harry's cock actually moved, visibly, at this. "Anyway I can get you," he answered, voice going breathy.

Draco gave him a lazy smile. "Like this?"

"Okay." Harry bent down, located Draco's mouth with his fingers first, and then his mouth. The kiss turned into more of a snog, and after a bit, Harry repositioned himself so that he was lying on top of Draco, his weight relaxing into Draco's frame. Tongues battled, and eventually left the confines of one another's mouths, beginning to exploring necks, fingers, earlobes, jaws. Their cocks were rubbing together, roughly, needing lube. Draco found it, searching fingers finally stumbling over it, and he opened it first, rubbing the warm, clear stuff onto Harry's cock.

Harry moaned and pushed into his hand, but Draco refused to distract his lover from the task at hand. He gave Harry the tube and spread his legs, quirking an eyebrow suggestively. Harry smiled, kissed him sloppily, and began to finger Draco - gently, but definitely less hesitantly than the first time. Perhaps knowing how it felt on himself gave him added confidence, Draco guessed. It was not long before Draco's spasming muscles had relaxed enough for him to declare himself ready, for Harry to push his cock into Draco's body. That cock was hot enough to burn, warm, like the rest of Harry, and pulsing with need and desire, for *him*.

Mouths and fingers were tangling; Harry's hands were pinning Draco's above his head as their fingers wove together, and they were kissing and moaning and *breathing*, and *ohfuck* Harry was moving, thrusting into him, slowly at first, gently, but gaining speed after a bit. He angled his hips differently several times, until he found the place that made Draco gasp and arch up against him. "There?" Harry asked, hardly able to speak, himself.

"Yeah!"

Harry moaned and began to fuck him harder, mouth dipping down occasionally to lave Draco's nipples with his tongue - *gods, that felt good* - sometimes biting, just roughly enough that the pain bit into Draco's desire and fed it. Sensation was corkscrewing up throughout his body, threatening to spill over at any moment, and he loved it.

"Harry…" his voice was thick with longing, and *need*, and Harry could hear it.

"Are you - "

"Yeah - please - I - oh, *fuck*, Harry!"

Harry untangled one of his fingers, and the next time his cock hit that sweet/hot place within Draco, his warm hand came onto Draco's cock, massaging and twisting in time with his rhythmed strokes. Draco was panting, his skin on fire, every nerve tingling - just a little more, and he would - Harry's hand squeezed and twisted again, and he pushed *hard*, and Draco was coming, come spraying up onto both their chests and even getting into Harry's hair. Harry just closed his eyes and moaned, hips jerking faster and harder into Draco now, top teeth tearing into his reddened lower lip. He took his hand off Draco's emptied cock and placed both hands on Draco's hips and *thrust*, hips bucking wildly, quickly, and with a loud groan, he was coming, hard, cursing, eyes squeezed tightly closed, flooding Draco's body with hot come, hips colliding with Draco's again and again as the pleasure wracking both their bodies was wrung from Harry's in liquid form.

When it was over, he collapsed onto Draco's chest, where they lay still for several minutes, then breathing hard and listening to the sounds of their pants. Draco's hand snaked into Harry's soft, damp hair. After a bit, Harry lifted his head from Draco's chest and kissed him, very slowly and very languorously, without any sort of hurry at all.

"Was that good?" Harry asked, after, almost uncertainly.

Draco laughed, his voice still husky, and shook his head. "Are you mad? It was amazing. Fucking good."

"Ha ha, *fucking* good," Harry said, smiling.

"Well, it was." But Draco smiled back.

"Good."

Draco pulled Harry down to him again and kissed him thoroughly. It was amazing, he thought muzzily, somewhere in the distance behind his present, dreamy state of mind, how he really didn't get tired of kissing Harry. He could do it forever. At least, after a week or so, that was what it felt like. It felt like much longer than a week, though. Something prompted him to speak, though he wasn't sure what it was. "I told Snape tonight that this is the best thing that ever happened to me," he said, surprised both by the confession itself, as well as the unusual

gentleness in his voice.

Harry raised his head again, his large, green eyes full of an emotion that Draco couldn't quite identify. "You did?"

"Yeah."

"Draco - " Harry's voice choked. It was probably post-orgasmic, Draco deduced, almost panicking. He'd heard that people sometimes got a little weepy.

He decided that he didn't care what the reason was. He liked it. "Yeah," he repeated. "It's true. You are."

Harry stared at him for another minute, then kissed him fiercely. And all other thoughts, for the moment, at least, fled.

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Chapter: 16

Chapter 16: To Spy or not To Spy

Draco actually woke before the alarm went off. Judging from the light in the tent, it was still dark out. What had woken him? Had Harry - he turned his head and looked, though he needn't have; Harry's weight was warm against his bare flesh, his head pillowed on Draco's chest, one arm flung randomly over him, his torso pressed into Draco's side. Then what?

Draco found his wand beside him, and whispered the *tempus* spell. Just after five. Not time to get up, then. Frowning in concentration, Draco's sleepy mind finally came up with the answer: he felt restless. Uneasy about something. What? A few minutes' careful thought provided further return: Snape. That was it. Snape wanted him to become a spy. And to watch Krum. Why? Why Krum, of all people? Surely, of all the recent graduates from Durmstrang, the fact that only one had contacted Dumbledore and requested to help in the fight against Voldemort said something about him. Unless it was all a ruse. Only Dumbledore should have been able to see it if it were

so. Why would Snape suspect him, unless, as he had told Draco during their first conversation after Draco's oath of loyalty, he simply suspected everyone, and a recent graduate from Durmstrang was a likely candidate.

And, if Harry was right, and the Weasel and Granger *had* gotten their act together at last, then Krum might possibly have a real motive for harm in there, somewhere. Draco's own thoughts caught up with him. Harm. Harry.

Why, though? His brain turned this over and over again. Why Krum? What did he stand to gain, Granger aside? He'd joined long before that. Although, they had gone to the Yule Ball together in fourth year. Draco hadn't forgotten that. But to join an army for a girl - Draco considered this dubiously. Reminded himself that he had *not* done the same; he'd joined because he had no choice. The fact that he had probably been subconsciously yearning for Harry all along had nothing to do with it. Was Krum in the same boat? Draco had no idea about the Death Eater connections in Eastern Europe. His father would have known. *But I can hardly owl him and ask.* Which brought him back to the whole question of spying.

Surely Snape would devise a foolproof disguise if he did agree. Something potion-induced, perhaps, that no Death Eater, not even his father, could see through. Acting as Snape's second. What did that mean, precisely? Would Snape be right in there, hooded and cloaked, while Draco watched from the shadows and kept himself quiet? Would *he*, himself, be in there, wearing a mask and pretending that he belonged? Or would they both be in the shadows, just watching and listening?

It was Wednesday. Snape had said three days. He needed to answer by Friday at the latest. The day after tomorrow. And he hadn't told Harry yet. Draco hesitated, thinking. Harry really wasn't all that great with mornings, but then, neither was he. It might be the only chance they had, with Quidditch that night. He wanted to at least let Harry know what was going on before then. Draco reset his wand to beep at six instead of six-thirty, then shifted slightly under Harry's arm, shoving himself down to lay his head on Harry's warm, dark one. He slept.

It felt like about two minutes had passed when the alarm went off. Draco turned it off. Harry hadn't even heard. Draco put his hand on Harry's warm belly and shook him lightly. "Hey. Git. Wake up."

Harry simply breathed deeply in response.

Draco rolled his eyes. *If we ever make it through this war, I'm buying us the loudest alarm clock*

ever made. He decided to get creative, and, without warning, yanked all the blankets off his sleeping lover's form.

Harry woke instantly, shivering, teeth chattering. "Hey!" His voice was croaky. "Don't, Draco! I'm freezing!" He slithered over and pressed his body against Draco's.

Draco laughed. "Good morning," he said, smiling evilly as he held the blankets out of reach.

Harry moaned and seemed to be attempting to actually blend his body into Draco's, hungry for warmth. "Draco…" he whined.

Draco relented and wrapped it around them both now, tightly. Harry sighed contentedly and closed his eyes again. "Hey! Don't go back to sleep! I'll take the blankets away again," he threatened.

Harry's eyes opened immediately. "You're mean," he complained. "Where's my owl? I'm ordering a better boyfriend."

"Git." Draco pinched him. "You have to wake up. We have to talk."

Harry's eyes, on the verge of closing, fluttered open again, totally serious. He looked alarmed. "We do? Why?"

"Don't panic. It's not that bad. Well, it might be. I don't know."

"Draco!"

"If you listen, I'll tell you," Draco said. "Snape talked to me last night."

Harry made a face. "What did he say?"

"Well, as you can probably deduce, he's really not wild on the idea of me being with you. But he's accepting it. Reluctantly. But he is. So, don't worry. But he wants me to spy with him."

Harry looked instantly unhappy. "He does?"

"Yeah."

"I really don't want you to," Harry said, his look of unhappiness increasing.

"I asked him if I could think about it," Draco said. "I have until Friday to answer him."

"What are you going to say?"

"I don't know yet. I wanted to talk to you about it." Draco waited, watching Harry carefully.

Harry seemed to be thinking many thoughts, most of which didn't look very good. "Why you?" This sounded almost rhetorical.

"Because I'm a Slytherin," Draco said, answering it anyway.

"Ex-Slytherin."

"Same thing."

Harry rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling of the tent. "Fuck," he said. "Why can't anything ever just work out nicely for once? It's bad enough that I have to play the role of Boy Hero here - and now *you* have to go off and get yourself into trouble, too. The chances of us both surviving that kind of thing are pretty small. And then we *definitely* won't be assigned together."

Draco hadn't thought of that. "True," he said. Then, feeling compelled, he reluctantly said his other thought. "The thing is, I think Snape will probably sort of pressure me into it because of Dumbledore getting me out of trouble with my father. You know, obligation and all. And if I say no, then I look like the biggest, most ungrateful pansy ever. You know how Snape is. You know how it would look."

Harry looked unhappier than ever. "Fuck."

"I know. I don't like it, either, and I don't want to do it. But I don't really see there being much choice, do you?" Draco looked at him.

To his credit, Harry responded like a Gryffindor. "No," he said, sighing.

Draco rolled onto him, running his thumbs over Harry's cheeks before bending to kiss Harry lightly. "Maybe we can talk to Dumbledore about our assignments," he said. It was as close as he could get to saying *thank you for not making it more difficult.*

"He'll never put us together," Harry said gloomily, looking away. "Being tolerant of our relationship is one thing. Risking the war because of his little hero being distracted is something totally different."

It was true, and Draco knew it. "Fuck."

"I know. What time is it? I don't want to think about this right now."

Draco cast the spell. "Six-twenty," he said.

"We woke up early, didn't we?"

"Yeah, we did. I thought we might need to talk longer. I just wanted to let you know, sooner. I didn't want to wreck things last night by telling you then."

Harry looked back at him then, and reached up to take a bit of Draco's hair between his fingers. "You should have told me anyway," he said, and his tone was different now. Warmer. "Don't ever think you need to hold things back. Protect me. I want to know what's going on with you."

"Well, I told you today," Draco pointed out. "Snape only talked to me last night. I just wanted things to be good for you. It was your birthday shag, after all."

Harry smiled. "True," he said. He reached for Draco, caught his chin and pulled his face down. "I love you," he said, before their lips touched.

Draco didn't say it back, didn't need to. He felt dizzy, like he was in further than he thought and just might be drowning. Only, it was a good sort of drowning. Unfamiliar, which made him wary, but it was still good. *This is what I wanted,*, he reminded himself. *To be allowed in all the way with him. This is what that feels like.*

* * *

"Harry, do me a favour," Draco said, as they walked to the Quiddich pitch.

"Sure, what?" Harry let his hand swing into Draco's. Draco instinctively caught his fingers and held, just for a moment.

"Let Krum Seek tonight. I'm supposed to be watching him, just for a bit."

Harry looked at him curiously. "Krum?" he repeated.

"Yeah, I know. But it's Snape. It didn't seem too much to ask, so I said yes. Could you let us both Seek? Because then I'll be watching him anyway," Draco explained.

"Of course, but - do you really think he'd try anything, or act suspiciously during a *Quidditch* match?" Harry asked dubiously.

"You never know," Draco replied. "Even little things, like, does he cheat? Does he play unfairly? Does he use magic during the game, and if so, how? I just want to see."

"Sure, fine," Harry said. He elbowed Draco playfully. "Then I get to be on your team tonight, if I'm not Seeking."

Draco smiled. "Okay. Can we be skins?"

"Great minds think alike. Naturally."

* * *

Draco was circling, the wind slightly crisp, which made his nipples hard. His back was lightly damp from sweat, which had cooled quickly in the wind. Krum was on the far side of the pitch, also circling, watching him right back. With his dark brows and hawk-like nose, he looked predatory. But he couldn't help that, Draco reminded himself. So far, so good. There were occasional things, tiny things - but they could all be excused in the name of the sport, Draco argued with himself. Like when Krum had feinted for the Snitch, trying to get Draco to go into a dive. Not one that would result in his plummeting into the ground, the way he'd done at the World Cup three years before, but just enough to get Draco to follow, getting out of Krum's way so that he could look without Draco's catching it, just for a few moments. Or when he'd caught the Bludger that had gone his way and thrown it at Harry - that was only natural; Harry was Chasing again, and he was on the opposite team. Anyone would have done the same. However, the Bludger Krum had hurled at Weasley had had quite a bit more force behind it, and the look on his face as he'd done it had been a little frightening.

But again, that could just be suspicions. Krum would naturally be unhappy that he'd lost the battle for Granger to Weasley, and he was three or four years older than the rest of them (well, not the twins), and from another country. Being quiet, a tad sullen, and angry about a relationship not working out did not add up to being a spy.

The Snitch flashed into Draco's sightlines just then, and he came out of his reverie with a jolt. Harry saw it, too - their eyes met, with the Snitch between them. Krum saw it, but it was closer to Draco. Draco put on a burst of speed and caught it, to a tumult of cheers. Krum zoomed down to the ground and tossed his broom at the shed angrily. Again, Draco thought - it was just anger of losing a match. Krum had been a professional player for the past three years, and he was losing, at least half the time that he was actually Seeking, to amateurs. Or was that all it was? Draco's eyes narrowed in thought, and he watched Krum stalk off the field as he landed.

* * *

That night, Harry asked Draco all the same questions that Draco had asked himself in the morning. About whether he'd be disguised and actually masquerading as a Death Eater, or if he'd just be watching from the sidelines. Draco told him that he didn't know.

"You have to ask him," Harry said urgently. "Tomorrow. We have potions review again. You have to ask him after, at lunch."

Draco lay in the curve of his lover's arm, still feeling warm and peaceful from the afterglow. This one thing shadowed everything else, though, and made him feel cold on the inside - a cold that not even Harry's brilliant warmth could reach. "Will it change your opinion on the entire matter?"

Harry paused. After a long moment, he replied, his voice low. "No. It's only fair that I don't get in your way. You don't like what I have to do, but you've accepted that I have to do it. It's only fair I do the same for you. I don't like it, not at *all* - but if you feel you have to do it, then who am I to tell you not to?"

Draco turned in Harry's arms then, to face him. "You're my lover," he said. "You can say what you need to say. But I'm glad you understand."

Harry closed his eyes as though he were in pain and buried his face against Draco's neck. "I hate this."

"I do, too."

"I know."

There didn't seem to be much else to say, so Draco didn't say it. He felt his body relax, after a bit, and they shifted into positions they could sleep in.

And when Draco woke during the night because Harry's hand was gripping his hip so tightly that it hurt, he didn't mind. He just placed his hand over Harry's and brought both up, between their chests, and kissed Harry's knuckles - an oddly affectionate gesture that he probably wouldn't have done if his lover was awake, or if he was all the way awake, too.

* * *

"Professor," Draco said, wiping the steamy haze from the potion from his face. "Can I have a word?"

Snape's face took on a standard sneer, glancing at Harry. "Do you not have somewhere to be right now?"

He knew damned well that there was no session now. He just wanted to be unpleasant, because Harry was around. "It's called lunch," Draco said, his tone carefully controlled. Harry glanced at him, then turned and fell into step beside Ron and Hermione. Draco had suggested he work with them that morning, as a gesture of magnanimity on his part - gods, he was playing nice with Weasley and Granger now, of all twisted, unlikely things. Next he'd be playing Exploding Snap, like a Hufflepuff.

Snape's lips compressed. "Watch your tone," he said.

"Stop being like that, then, *sir*," Draco said, gritting his teeth. "You know it's lunch time."

"I only arrived on Tuesday," Snape said loftily. "You cannot expect me to have - "

"Yes I can," Draco interrupted. "You have a memory like an elephant. Come on. If I'm supposed to be working with you, you're going to have to get used to it. I'm not asking you to jump up and down for joy about it. Just try to be civil, okay?"

"You forget your place," Snape warned, his eyes gleaming.

"No, I don't think I have," Draco said firmly, "sir. Look. I'm just saying, alright? It really has nothing to do with our professional relationship."

"Aside from the fact that I loathe your paramour."

"Yes, aside from that," Draco said, getting truly angry now. "Who is, I might point out, the one who is going to save all of our - all of *us*," he corrected.

"Unless he dies in the attempt," Snape said, his lip curling.

Draco's fists clenched at his sides. "Look, can we talk or not? I need some more information before I can commit to this spying business."

Snape finally turned and started walking toward the lodge. "What do you want to know?" he asked stiffly.

"I want to know," Draco said promptly, relieved that the topic of Harry had been abandoned, "if I would have to actually pretend to be a Death Eater, mingle with them and all that, or if it's more a question of just watching while you do it, or do we both watch, or what?"

"First," Snape said curtly, "you will *not* be masquerading as a Death Eater. You know far too little about their rituals and mannerisms, and even if you had started training to fill such a position months ago, I would not be able to trust you to do that flawlessly. And it would have to be flawless. Secondly, I never do that, myself. It is a question of, as you said, watching, listening, and following. Tracking, locating - all of that."

Draco felt quite relieved. "Okay," he said.

Then Snape let the other shoe drop. "As well as the occasional special assignment."

"Special assignment?" Draco repeated, looking at Snape. "What do you mean?"

"Those come up from time to time," Snape said evasively. "I really could not say more at this point. They come from Dumbledore."

They walked in silence for several minutes, and Draco digested this. "Do the other staff members know about all this?"

"No, nor will they, save for Dumbledore and Shacklebolt," Snape replied. "Otherwise, it must be kept under strict confidence."

Draco hesitated. "I told Harry." He figured Snape knew that already, but still. Better to have it out in the open.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Of course. He will pervert you into a perfect Gryffindor yet."

Draco was pissed off at the choice of the term "pervert", and also at the implication. "If he wanted a Gryffindor, he could have found one," he said, his tone as stiff as Snape's had been earlier.

"I do not need to hear about this."

"I'm just *saying* - gods, you know how to be difficult!" Draco said, losing hold of his temper. "What, do you have to hate me now, just because I'm dating Harry Potter? It's not contagious, you know! I'm not going to morph into him!"

Snape firmly said nothing at all. When they reached the lodge, Draco was still fuming. Snape merely said, "It looks as though the Gryffindor table is full. Well, see you later."

Stung, Draco looked for Harry. There *was* an empty seat by him, but it was partially concealed by the fact that Fred was leaning across it to impart something that was apparently vastly funny to Harry and everyone else at the table, as they were all roaring with laughter. And, judging from the look on Fred's face (mirrored on George's, across from him), it was probably something not quite allowed, too. Draco felt some of the tension drain away, and went to join them.

* * *

Friday's morning session ended with cardiovascular training again, a term which Draco had only learned, oh, a little over a month ago. Translated, it meant running. *Lots* of running. And Draco had discovered that, while he was a perfectly adequate runner, and getting more so all the time, he hated it with a passion. Not as much as Longbottom, at least, who was a less-than-adequate runner, but still. At least Longbottom wasn't in his group this week, constantly getting in the way when one needed to lap him. Smith and Macmillan were just as bad though, if not worse. At least Longbottom didn't gripe all the time, like Smith, which alternated with his bragging about speeds and all sorts of boring shit. Macmillan, on the other hand, was busy trying not to expire from an early heart attack. He'd always been on the… solid side, to put it nicely, and running was clearly *not* the ex-Hufflepuff's natural strength.

Granger seemed to be doing alright. Weasley was still doing weights; they alternated. Harry was spotting for him, and they appeared to be chatting amiably. Out of sheer curiosity, coupled with his desire to satisfy Snape's one request, at least, Draco caught up to Granger on her next lap.

"Granger," he said, and was proud of the fact that he almost could run and talk without gasping at the same time now.

"Draco," she returned, shoving extra-frizzy hair out of her eyes. "How's it going?"

"Oh, fine," Draco said casually. "So. Update me. What's going on with you and Weasley?"

A wry look, delivered sideways. "Aren't we the little gossip?" she said dryly. "Well, we're together now. I finally got everything figured out."

Draco couldn't resist the smirk. Didn't really try, either. "It was really very simple, Granger. A fool could have seen it before you did, which is ironic."

A withering look. "Things aren't always that simple," Granger responded. "Look at you and Harry. Anyone could have called that romantic tension, right since the day you two met."

"The term is sexual tension, Granger," Draco drawled, making her blush. Or perhaps her face was just that red from running.

"Well. Same thing."

True enough. "So, Krum disappointed, then?" Draco probed.

A sharp glance. "Why do you ask?"

He shrugged as best he could while running. "Just wondering." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Harry and the Weasel had returned to the track and were running side by side. "So?"

"Well, of course he is," Granger said, frowning. "It's only natural, isn't it?"

"Do you think he took it like most blokes would? Or did you find him to be unreasonably angry

about it all?"

A curious look this time. "Well, he was quite angry," Granger allowed. "I thought it was all - well, it's hard to say, really. I don't really know how much he liked me, I guess. If it was really serious, then why wouldn't he be angry?"

"But - say, if he only joined the army to get to you," Draco pressed, "then - wouldn't he be especially upset?"

"I didn't think of that," Granger admitted. "He just said that it seemed like the right thing to do."

"What do you know about his parents?"

"Not much. I was at their house in Bulgaria last summer, and they seemed pretty normal, I guess. For Bulgarians. I don't really know that much about Bulgarian culture yet, so again, it's hard to say. They have money, though probably not as much as you."

"Granger, I have no money. Disowned, remember?"

"Oh." She winced. "Right. Sorry. I meant your father, then."

"Hmm," Draco said, pondering the information. "Did they seem like potential Death Eaters?"

"Viktor's *parents*?!" Granger asked, shocked.

"Yeah."

"I - I hadn't even thought of that." Granger said, still obviously surprised. "I don't know. I don't think so, though. How can I tell, after only a week?"

Draco sighed. "Right." Dead end there. He changed the subject, squinting at the Weasel on the other side of the track. "So, happy with Weasley, then?"

Her voice grew much warmer. "Happy? Oh, definitely. It was the right decision. I'm sure of it."

Draco smiled, to himself. "Good, then. Listen, I'm going to stop and wait for them to catch up. Do you want to, too?"

Granger gave him an odd sort of smile. "Sure." They stopped running, watching and waiting for the other two to join them. "You can't stand being apart from him at all, can you?" she asked, still smiling.

Draco just gave a little shrug, one-shouldered, and smiled evasively.

Harry and the Weasel stopped running when they got to them. "Are you guys done already?" Harry asked, breathing hard. His cheeks were flushed.

"No, I still have three laps to go," Draco said, wishing he *were* done.

"Then what are you - "

"He was *waiting* for you," Hermione explained exasperatedly, though she smiled at him. She went to Weasley and whispered something to him, which made him smile. They headed back to the track and resumed running.

Harry grinned. "Were you really."

"Yes. How much longer do you have?"

Harry moaned. "Six laps."

Draco grimaced. "I'll run with you," he said.

Harry laughed. "Come on, then," he said. "Let's see if we can beat Ron and Hermione. And you *definitely* get to top tonight for running the extra with me."

"If I can still *move* by then," Draco grumbled, but the now-familiar frisson of desire shivered down his spine, and other regions, as well.

Harry gave him a look which didn't help things any, as they set off as a brisk pace again. "You'd better," was all he said, before they started running for real.

"You'll just have to inspire me, then."

"Oh, I will," Harry promised. And Draco grinned and managed to forget, just for a little, that he was sweating under the hot, August sun in an army training camp for a war he didn't want to be remotely involved in.

A/N: Your reviews are most welcome! :)

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Chapter: 17

Chapter 17: Krum and the Missive

Friday evening appeared to be a little cooler than the rest of the day, and Draco was devoutly relieved. After supper, he left the sheltered warmth of the lodge and went outside. Stretching his sore muscles (his calves were in knots from all the running), Draco froze, his eye caught by something.

Krum.

Standing under a tree not far off, he had his back to the lodge and to Draco, and appeared to be just standing and thinking. *Well,* Draco thought, narrowing his eyes, *it could well take him that much concentration. Can't walk and think at the same time. How on earth did he and Goyle never become friends?* Draco walked over, casually. "What are you doing?" he asked, assuming a friendly, conversational voice.

Krum jumped, startled. He whirled about, saw Draco, then relaxed. "Oh, it's only you," he said, his heavy accent thicker than it sometimes was.

Draco smiled engagingly. "Yep, sorry to disappoint. Just me. What's going on?"

Krum sighed and shifted his weight. "Not'ing much," he said. "I vos just… t'inking."

Draco nodded his head in the direction of the field. He and Harry weren't due to rendez-vous until much later, anyway, and this was far too excellent an opportunity to pass up. "Want to go for a walk?" he suggested.

Krum gave him an odd look, but considered, and eventually said, "Vell, yes, alright, den."

"You seem… a little upset about something," Draco said carefully, falling into step beside the taller Bulgarian. Krum was only a few inches taller, but despite his skinniness, his shoulders were quite broad, and Draco knew for a fact that the other was quite strong; he was top of their weight-training sessions the week Draco had been in his training group. Draco maintained a cautious distance.

Krum walked in silence for several minutes, then answered moodily. "Yes, I am upset," he said.

"What's up?" Draco asked again. Politely.

Krum stared off into the horizon. "I don't know vot you know about me and Her-mi-o-ne," he said, sounding like he was practically spelling it out in his head. "But it is about her."

"Ah," Draco said, as if this were surprising news. "Well. I know that you went to the Yule Ball with her three years ago, during the Triwizard Tournement, and I heard a rumour that she visited you in Bulgaria last summer."

"Yes, she did," Krum confirmed, shoving his hands into his pockets and slouching despondently. "I t'ought she liked me. I haff asked her to give me a clear answer, many times, but she has not. Not until this week."

"Mmm," Draco said, sympathetically. "Yeah. I heard about that, too. I guess it took her awhile to make up her mind."

Krum looked at him. "Are you friends with her? Harry, I know - I haff seen you walking vith him."

Draco pondered his choice of words. "Well, I wouldn't say that I'm exactly friends with Granger," he said. "I didn't really get along with her and Harry and Weasley when we were all at school, but yeah, I am friends with Harry now, so things are a bit different. We try to get along, and Granger and I have talked a couple of times this summer. Why do you ask?"

"I did not guess dat she would be wanting the other one, Harry's friend," Krum said. "I vos afraid she would go with Harry - I am still surprised by dat."

Draco's lips quirked. "Well, it probably helps that Harry's not really into girls," he offered.

Krum's eyes widened. "Vot?!"

"He doesn't really make it all that public, so don't say anything," Draco advised.

Krum was still, apparently, reeling in shock. "I did not know dat!"

"It's true," Draco assured him. "So, you never really had to worry about that. But I always thought that she and Weasley would end up together - before she met you, I mean. After that, we weren't so sure."

A long sigh. "I t'ought dat she liked me," Krum said again, pensively.

"Did you come here because of her?" Draco asked.

A pause. "Not exactly," Krum said. "But it vos part of it." He looked at Draco. "I do not know vot you know about Durmstrang," he said, sounding a bit uncertain.

"A fair bit, actually," Draco said. "My father almost sent me there, so I do know quite a bit. And a lot of the kids I grew up with ended up there. You know, children of my parents' friends. My mother didn't want me that far away, though, and neither did my father - he wanted to keep a closer eye on me, I guess." He laughed, and it sounded bitter, even to him.

A curious look from Krum. "Your father," he began, then trailed off nervously.

"Is a Death Eater, yes. I've been disowned."

"Does he know dat you are here?"

"What do you think? Of course not," Draco said, more sharply than he'd meant to.

"Sorry," Krum said awkwardly, then went on with what he'd been saying. "So, you know dat Durmstrang, it doing very much vith Dark magic. Lots of my class vent to the Dark Lord vhen ve graduated. I did not vant to."

"Why not?" Draco asked, curious despite himself. Another misfit.

Krum shrugged his broad, rounded shoulders. "I don't vant to hurt anybody," he said. His eyes narrowed at the horizon once more as they walked. "I vant to help. Dumbledore, he is a good man. He vos good to me, vhen I vos at Hogwarts. He told people dat it vos not my fault, about the crazy man making me attack dat boy who got killed. I vos very afraid dat I vould be arrested, den. I t'ought dat nobody vould believe dat I meant no harm. I just vanted to play in the Tournement."

Oh. Draco realized then that there was no reason to suspect Krum any more. He was just another misfit, like himself. Who'd just had his heart broken. He knew what it felt like to be distrusted and suspected all the time, too. And his one friend, the girl who'd unwittingly (mostly, at least) led him on, had deserted him. Draco found it in himself to feel sorry for Krum. "I see," he said. "I really do. So, you contacted Dumbledore because you wanted to fight? Or because you needed his protection?"

"Both," Krum said shortly. "My father - " he looked at Draco. "He vould not understand. So, I

ran away. I haff not heard from him since."

"And… your mother?" Draco probed.

Krum's eyes clouded over. "I do not know," he said. "She left us last year, and I haff not heard from her since."

"Oh," Draco said, his throat feeling strangely dry. "I'm sorry." Then something occurred to him.

"It is not your fault," Krum said. He looked thoughtful. "Vhy are you talking to me?" he asked suddenly, sounding curious.

"I… just wanted to see if you were alright," Draco said, as truthfully as possible. In every aspect, really. And Krum was alright, at least in the political sense. Draco trusted his character judgement, and he could sense no deceit in Krum. Not a bit. It wasn't his fault he'd been raised by a man who clearly thought that Durmstrang was an ideal place for his only son, and by a woman unfeeling enough to ditch her only child forever.

"My father, he vanted me to keep playing Quidditch," Krum said. "I don't know vhat vill happen with dat now."

Right. He'd left a professional Quidditch career for this. "How old are you now?" Draco asked, trying to remember.

"I am twenty-one this year," Krum said.

"It won't be too late, then," Draco said, wondering why, exactly, he was trying to cheer Krum up. "Even without regular training, you're a good enough player that you'd get back onto the team, wouldn't you?"

Krum shook his head. "I don't know," he said morosely. "I feel slower already. You and Harry - you are both such good flyers - you haff both beaten me dis summer already. And who knows how long the var vill go? It could take years."

Point. "True," Draco admitted. "Well, I guess we'll just have to hope it doesn't. We've got lives to be living here."

Krum gave a terse laugh. "Yes, dat is true," he conceded. He looked at Draco. "Den ve vill fight hard, and vin dem back, yes?"

"Absolutely," Draco said, with a smile.

* * *

By the time Harry scratched at Draco's tent that night, the ex-Slytherin was already stretched out, nude, waiting for him. Harry scuttled inside, then stopped, jaw falling open.

"Don't just stand there, gaping," Draco said lazily. "Come in all the way."

Harry closed his mouth. "Yes, *sir*!" he said, and finished zipping the tent flap closed behind him. "Gods, Draco - you look amazing. Do you have *any* idea how *hot* you are?"

"Of course I do," Draco said airily. "Take your clothes off. At once."

Harry grinned. "Okay." He kicked off his trainers and rapidly shed the rest of his clothes. Setting his wand carefully out of harm's way, he turned around and practically dove at Draco. It was good that Draco had already put up the Silencing spell, because he yelled and giggled madly - a fact which would embarrass him later, but at the moment, he only had thought for the boy on top of him. Harry was sitting on his chest, cock hardening before Draco's hungry eyes. Harry bent down to touch their lips together, then moaned softly and slid down Draco's body, lying against it and deepening the kiss.

"I've - " Harry interrupted his own murmur with interspersed kisses, dispensed warmly onto Draco's face, lips, and neck - "been thinking - about this - all day."

"So have I," Draco confessed, though it was hardly surprising news. He grabbed the back of Harry's head and dragged him in for a longer, hotter, more violent kiss. It only ended when they were half-suffocated for lack of breath, then, gasping, resumed again. Harry was groaning and rubbing against him frantically before the end, and Draco was trying to restrain himself from just

rolling them over and shoving into Harry, hard, without any preparation whatsoever. Which gave him a rather marvellous thought, actually. With his left hand, he caught Harry's chin again, and kept his face close in order to kiss it with rather wild abandon; tongue and lips attacking his cheeks, chin, nose, forehead, mouth - anything, really. With his right hand, Draco (first having offered his fingers to Harry to suck, which he did quite willingly), Draco slid his hand gently into Harry's cleft, and just massaged. Harry, who was valiantly attempting (and with moderate success) to return Draco's volley of kissing, moaned and brought their mouths together again. Draco probed inside, seeking that place… which was damned hard to find from this position.

Harry wasn't complaining, though, and appeared to have an abrupt thought. Pulling his face away, he suddenly grinned at Draco, rather smirkingly.

"What?" Draco asked, breathless.

Harry's grin deepened, and he just said, "I rather like being up here."

"Git, you're bottoming tonight," Draco reminded, his cock giving a needy throb, as if he needed reminding.

"I know," Harry said easily. "But I'm bottoming from up here, thank you very much." He lifted his pelvis from Draco's, where their cocks had been enjoying quite a nice little re-acquaintance, and spread his thighs. The look on his face was… enough to get Draco's blood racing even faster. Harry bit his swollen lower lip in concentration, and lowered himself onto Draco's jutting cock.

As his tight heat enveloped Draco, Draco was almost worried that his eyes had rolled into the back of his head. He couldn't even speak at first - "… Harry…" he finally managed, his voice tight and strained.

Harry's eyes were closed, as though in pain, but he opened them again and smiled seductively down at Draco. "This okay?"

"Definitely," Draco said, still breathless, his heart pounding.

Harry shifted a bit, experimenting with angles, until Draco jerked his hips upward once, and Harry moaned loudly. "Oh, *fuck*, Draco - do that again - " and shoved downward, hard, Draco bucked his hips upward obediently. Harry's teeth were digging into his lower lip now, and that

sight was also quite intoxicating.

"Move, please," Draco begged, past caring about how needy it sounded. He *was* needy, damn it!

They found a rhythm and got into it; Harry was leaning back a bit, bracing himself with his hands on Draco's thighs, behind him, his cock up against his belly. Draco was admiring its thickness and not-inconsiderable length even as he panted, the pleasure beginning to consume his very brain cells. When Draco came, it was incredible; he hardly had to do anything at all, which was both maddening and quite tremendously good all at once. Harry gave him a moment to recover, then lifted himself off and rolled onto his back. Draco followed, moved down his body, and wrapped his lips around Harry's glistening cock at once. The precome was salty, but Draco was getting used to it. It was just the taste of Harry. That was all. He was coming to associate it with being with Harry like this, and that was nothing if not a good thought. Harry was fighting not to fuck his mouth, just to let him suck until Harry came, but Draco could feel the other trembling with the effort of resisting.

That wouldn't do at all. Draco groped with his left hand (his right was busy on Harry's balls) and found Harry's right hand, put it on the back of his own head, encouraging. He held his head still, his mouth only around the head of Harry's cock, and waited. Harry got it, and groaned, "Draco…", his voice thick with lust and need and gratitude. He began to pump upward, fairly gently, but Draco knew he was still holding back. He shaped his tongue into a U-shape that Harry's cock could glide along, then focused hard on relaxing his throat. On Harry's next thrust, Draco moved his head down, and fought his gag reflex when Harry's cock hit the soft flesh of the back of his throat.

Harry made a whimpering sound, breathy, needy, and did it again, his fist clenching around several strands of Draco's hair. That sound in and of itself was extremely arousing, actually, and it made the job easier. Draco continued deep-throating until he felt Harry's balls quiver in his hand, and knew that his lover was about to come. When the moment came, Draco kept Harry's cock all the way in his mouth and held on tight with his lips. Harry was writhing and making that noise again, hips spasming as his cock jerked and flooded Draco's throat. It was actually considerably easier to swallow that way, too, which wasn't a bad thing at all. When Harry was finished, Draco slid his lips off and wiped his mouth.

"Come here," Harry ordered softly, though he was panting.

Draco crawled up and settled his weight on Harry's chest. "Like that?" he asked, and was slightly horrified at how raspy his voice had gone.

Harry's eyes were heavy-lidded, and he smiled. "Gods, you sound sexy like that."

"Are you saying I don't sound sexy all the time?"

"No," Harry said firmly, turning Draco's mouth up. "I am *not* saying that at all. That was the most amazing blow job I have ever gotten. You are incredible. There's no other word for it. Thank you!"

Draco was almost embarrassed; only a Gryffindor (or ex-Gryffindor) would thank someone for a sucking-off. He didn't know quite what to say, so he settled for pulling Harry in and kissing him again.

They had just about fallen asleep when a flapping sound and a hoot came at the tent flap. Draco opened his eyes. Harry sat up. "Hedwig?"

Another hoot. "Just a second," Draco told her, and crawled, naked, to the door. He unzipped the tent flap enough to let her in, then hurriedly closed it again. "What are you doing here so late, girl?"

Hedwig gave him a disdainful look, and Draco recalled, in sudden self-consciousness, that he wasn't normally naked in front of the owl. He scrambled back to the blankets and got under them. Harry was trying hard not to giggle, but Draco caught his eye. "Don't say anything," Draco said truculently, and felt his face warm.

Hedwig followed, and sat on his blanketed knee. There was a letter tied to her leg, which she stuck out at Draco. "For me?" he inquired, and took it off. "Who's sending me letters through you?"

His eyes skimmed down the parchment. Ah. "Who's it from?" Harry asked curiously.

"Snape."

"What does *he* want?" Harry asked, the revulsion showing in his voice.

"He's probably just responding," Draco said. "I owled him before supper to say that I would do it. Spy with him, I mean." He read quickly.

Malfoy,

Thank you for your owl and for your decision. This will be of great help to the cause. I have had a chance to speak to Dumbledore about this, and it turns out that he will require us to start almost immediately. Make plans to be away for approximately two or three days next week. We will leave on Monday. Please send this owl back with your confirmation, and destroy this parchment immediately. Thank you,

Severus Snape.

Draco swallowed. Monday. He handed the parchment wordlessly to Harry, who read it quickly.

"Oh, gods," Harry said, and his cheeks drained of colour. "*Monday?!*"

"I know," Draco said, his stomach clenching. "I don't know what he thinks I could do by then. I mean, I sort of thought he would give me some extra stealth training, or something."

Harry's eyes were very sober. "Well, you've been doing really well in stealth," he observed. "Maybe they just told him you were fine."

"Maybe," Draco said. They fell silent, each thinking it over.

After a bit, Harry sighed and lay back, pulling Draco with him. "I don't want to think about it."

"Neither do I," Draco said, and allowed himself to be pulled down. With one arm on Harry's chest, he said, "I have to answer his owl."

Harry ran his fingers through Draco's messy, still-damp hair. "Right away?"

"I should. Before I forget. Or fall asleep."

Harry sighed again, and checked the time. It was past midnight. "Yeah, I guess you should," he said reluctantly, and released Draco.

Draco reached for his writing materials and dashed off a quick note. It was short and to the point. Hedwig hopped from Harry's knee, where she'd gone while he'd been writing, back to his. Draco ran his hand over her soft head. "I don't want to send this," he said flatly. "But you know where it's going, right?"

A soft hoot and a light nip to his finger. "Good girl," Draco said, and patted her again before affixing the scroll. "Off you go, then." He crawled to the door again and unzipped the nylon. Hedwig followed and flew out into the night.

"Come back," Harry said, and he sounded definitely sulky.

Draco turned around and returned to his place, favouring Harry with a sad smile. "You knew this would happen."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it."

Draco draped one of his legs over one of Harry's. "I don't like it, either. And I didn't think it would be so soon."

"Me, neither."

There didn't seem to be much else to say. But after a bit, Harry volunteered, sounding unhappy, "It's okay if you don't like me having to do what I do, either."

Draco raised his head from Harry's chest and looked down at him. "I don't," he said simply, and bent to kiss Harry gently. "It doesn't change anything."

"I love you."

Gryffindor, Draco thought, but without malice. It was his way of trying to confirm that everything was alright, trying to *make* alright, just by saying so. It was not something that Draco felt the constant urge to confess; having said it once or twice already, he figured that Harry knew how he felt. Still. Something tugged on his mental sleeve and prompted him. Harry said it; he probably wanted to hear it. Why not. It was true, after all; whether or not Draco said it out loud again. Especially if it made a difference to Harry? Draco kissed him again, lingeringly. "I love you, too."

* * *

Sunday night's Quidditch game was fast and furious. Harry and Krum were Seeking - Draco, to his own surprise, had grudgingly offered to try Chasing for once. Partly because he was feeling guilty to Harry about the trip the next day, partly because he was feeling slightly guilty about being the only one of the three Seekers who never played a different position, and partly because he felt sorry for Krum. Also to his surprise, Draco was enjoying Chasing more than he'd thought he might. It was so different than it might as well have been a different sport altogether, but it was still fun. Though he vastly preferred Seeking.

Krum put such a quick end to the first game by catching the Snitch fifteen minutes in that Harry suggested they play again. The second game, naturally, had taken a long time - longer than Draco wanted; he and Snape were due to be Apparating out sharp at seven the next morning. Which was no earlier than the training generally started, but he wanted to be well-rested and ready for it. Plus, he wanted to have some time with Harry before they fell asleep. Draco had a fleeting moment of disbelief that he cared more about that than about who caught the Snitch. Only fleeting. He flew by Harry, who was on his team again. "Harry!"

Harry flashed him an adrenaline-pumped grin. "Hi!"

Draco grabbed onto Harry's Firebolt, pulling them parallel. "Do you know how late it is?"

"No, what time is it?"

"Past eleven," Draco told him. It didn't take long for Harry to catch on.

"Oh," he said, his face getting troubled. "I wanted us to - "

"Yeah, me, too," Draco said. "So, just let Krum have the Snitch already, okay? Then we can get out of here."

"Okay," Harry said, only a bit reluctantly. "If we can find it, that is."

"I'll look for it, too," Draco decided.

"Okay." Harry touched Draco's fingers lightly, then pulled his broom away and flew off.

However, there was no need for Draco's offer - Team One was cheering loudly and flanking Krum, who was almost smiling for the first time in days.

* * *

In the end, they went for a bit of a walk before going back to Draco's tent. Harry had been talking vaguely of spending the occasional night in his own tent (solo), which Granger had apparently told him would be good for their relationship (jargon, in Draco's opinion), but since Snape's owl on Friday, he'd abandoned that idea fairly quickly.

They were in the furthest-out fields from the tents, just walking and holding hands. Draco was realizing that nothing could have ever prepared him for the fact that just doing that could be so very nice, and he was already having pangs of regret for the next few days. Snape had been every bit as tight-lipped in person, saying that he couldn't say exactly when they'd be back, or what they'd be doing. It sounded like a lot of playing things by ear. But Draco hadn't slept alone in weeks, and was already missing Harry's warmth. They weren't talking much, just the occasional bit of conversation here and there. And Draco couldn't imagine September, what he would do if they were, as he was positive, going to be sent off on different assignments.

"You remember how to do the spell that makes your footsteps silent?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Draco said, almost absently.

Harry shifted their hands, lacing his fingers through Draco's. "I'm not going to say how much I don't want you to go."

Draco laughed and stepped in front of Harry, blocking his way. "You just did, prat."

"I know." Harry's eyes were pools of worry and longing, and Draco couldn't resist them and didn't try to.

He cupped Harry's face in his hands. "I'll be back really soon," he promised. "It's just for a couple of days."

"They'll be the longest days of my life," Harry said miserably.

Draco leaned his forehead against Harry's. "I know," he said softly. "Me, too."

They kissed for a long, knee-melting moment. When it was done, Harry leaned against him, arms tight around Draco's middle, and said, "Take me to bed. I don't care what we do, I just want to be with you."

"Okay. Let's Apparate to Field Two and walk from there, okay?"

"Sure."

They reappeared at the edge of Field Two, near the trees, and looked around. No one. Good. They made their way to Draco's tent in silence, where they undressed in silence, as well. When that was out of the way, Harry was lipping at him, wordlessly imploring Draco with a neediness that Draco didn't even want to explore in himself. All he knew was that his chest and throat were tight from it, and that leaving tomorrow was the last thing he wanted to do. He was also aware that this was a practically suicidal attitude. *I'll worry about that in the morning*, he resolved firmly, and guided Harry down to his bed.

A/N: Feedback is lovely! :)

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Chapter: 18

Chapter 18: On the Moors

Draco had set his wand-alarm to beep at six. He shut it off and lay still, heart beating in immediate anticipation. Today. He was going today. He turned his head and looked at Harry, who was still fast asleep, his brow wrinkled in though in worry or concern. Propped up on one elbow, Draco looked at him for a long time. An odd feeling of ridiculous tenderness was welling up from somewhere and making him feel both warm and raw, as though someone had taken his skin off and wouldn't give it back. It felt… vulnerable.

Harry was beautiful, even with his face scrunched up. Those delicious corners of his mouth, sliding off into the tucks of his permanently rosy cheeks; his slightly-crooked nose, even his chin - they all made Draco feel stupidly protective. He almost wished he could just slip away without having to wake Harry and tell it that it was time for him to go, that he'd be back in a few days, and not to worry.

He *would* worry. He was a Gryffindor. Moreover, he was Harry. And suddenly, Draco couldn't stand being alone in this strange, soul-stripping feeling any more. He put one hand on Harry's warm ribcage and shook. "Harry."

To his surprise, Harry's eyes opened at once. He just looked at Draco, blinking. "It's time," he said, voice scratchy.

"Not quite, but soon," Draco confirmed. He slid down under the blankets again, and Harry scooted over to him. "I just wanted to see you a little bit before I go."

Harry held up his right hand, and Draco laid his own against it. Harry twined their fingers together, then brought both hands to his lips. "Don't do anything stupid."

"What kind of advice is that from a former Gryffindor?" Draco chided, smiling wryly. "I'm a Slytherin. We excel at looking out for ourselves."

"Former Slytherin," Harry corrected.

"Whatever. I won't. I'll be as careful as I can."

"You're not going like that, are you?" Harry asked. "I mean, just - undisguised? Everyone would recognize your hair from miles away."

"No, Snape said he'd put some glamours on me or something. He'll take care of it. I know you don't like him, but he knows what he's doing." Draco rubbed his thumb over Harry's thumbnail.

"Yeah, I know," Harry admitted. "Still. He hates me. He might start hating you, too, since he knows about us. I just don't want him being careless with you because of me."

"He won't," Draco said positively. "Trust me. And I intend to crack him before the end of all this."

"Why just glamours?" Harry asked, brow furrowing again. "Those can be taken off. You need something physical, too."

"Like what, a wig?" Draco said, with a laugh. "No."

"But - "

"Do you *have* a wig?" Draco interrupted him.

"No," Harry said sulkily.

"Neither do I. That settles that," Draco said. "Now. I have to get up and get dressed soon. Do I get a farewell snog, or something?"

Harry smiled, and his face relaxed into it. "Or something," he said. "But - Draco - "

Draco moved closer yet and put his left hand on Harry's cheek. "This is the part where you keep saying all those things about my maybe not coming back and what will you do without me if that happens and all that, isn't it?" he asked softly, with another wry smile.

Harry's eyes were very green and very bright. "Yeah," he said, hardly above a whisper. "Draco - "

Draco wrapped his arms around the other, fiercely tight. "Don't say them."

"Draco - I - "

"Shhh," Draco chastised, and kissed Harry with still more ferocity. "Don't - " kiss "say - " kiss "anything like that." Another kiss. "I'm coming back. I promise. This will just be a short little trip. It's probably half still my spy training, or something. I doubt he'll get me into anything too big this first time."

Harry seemed somewhat reassured by this. "Okay," he said, but there was still a slight quaver to his voice.

"And when I get back, it's your turn to top," Draco said, hoping for a glimpse of Harry's mischievous smile before he went.

He got it. Just a flash, but it was there. "True," Harry said, and there it was again, coupled with a bit of hopefulness. "Do we have time - ?"

Draco rolled onto him and knocked their hips together. "Just," he breathed. "And then I have to go."

Harry nodded, and pulled Draco down to him again while they rubbed their cocks together. It was just brief and sweet, but good. Draco was warm and flushed when it was over. He reached for a comb and dragged it quickly through his hair, then found some clothes. He wouldn't need much. He wore his favourite jeans, socks, trainers, a plain black t-shirt (designer, but quite worn now) and a hooded sweatshirt. In a small bag, he stuffed some clean socks, boxers, and a DA t-shirt that he would have to disguise if he had to wear it, and his personal effects. Harry,

standing and dressed, handed him his wand. "Can I come with you to the Apparation point?" he asked.

"Of course," Draco replied. "Let's go." He checked the time. It was only quarter to. They walked over to Field One, encountering few other people on their way. Most of the training groups were in the farther out fields this week, for whatever reason, and besides, people tended to get there right when it started - not fifteen minutes before. Even that tiny handful of people who ate breakfast routinely were still, in all likelihood, in the lodge.

Harry looked suddenly thoughtful. "Hang on," he said. "You go on. Where is it?"

"Just outside the staff tent," Draco said. "Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back," Harry said. "Don't go before I get there!"

"Okay," Draco said, shrugging. He continued on his own.

Snape was standing outside, squinting in the morning sun, which he appeared to feel very negatively about, judging from the expression on his face. He had a small black (no surprise there) bag with him, and gave Draco a cool nod. "Malfoy. Good morning."

This was already considerably more civil than Draco was accustomed to hearing from Snape, which boded well. He returned the nod. "Morning."

Now a sneer - ah, there it was. "No escort?" Snape asked, lip twisting.

Draco's eyebrows jacked up, but he refused to show his anger. "He's just gone to get something, I think," he said.

Now the lips compressed. "Very well!" Snape snapped, eyebrows coming together in a scowl.

Dumbledore had evidently told him to be nice about the whole thing, and that was probably the best Snape could do. Draco turned to look behind him - they hadn't been far from the tents at all yet, when Harry had gone back. And sure enough, there he was - with a bright, white speck on

his shoulder. Draco felt his expression brighten. Hedwig.

Snape had followed his line of vision and gave a loud, disapproving sniff. "Stop that," Draco said, without looking at him. "Gods, could you give it a rest? It won't poison you to be decent about this."

"You have extraordinarily poor taste," Snape said, crossing his arms.

Draco *did* look at him now, and glared. "Watch it!" he said, lacing his voice with venom. "I will *not* take crap from you or anyone else about Harry, whether you're my superior or otherwise!"

Snape glared right back. "Malfoy - "

"Who would you have me with, instead?" Draco challenged. "Blaise Zabini? He's a Slytherin if there ever was one!"

Harry was there now, and was looking uneasily between the two of them. "What's going on?" he asked, voice wary.

Draco gave Snape a long, hard stare, demanding that *he* explain.

After a long moment, Snape straightened his shoulders. "Nothing," he told Harry loftily, not quite looking him in the eye. "We were merely conversing. Come, Malfoy. It is time."

"Wait," Draco said, and turned to Harry and Hedwig. "Hey," he said, in a much softer tone, to Hedwig, and stroked her head. She was sitting on Harry's forearm now, and caught his finger playfully in her beak. Draco let his eyes meet Harry's mutinous gaze - angry about Snape, probably - and remembered Harry's question about disguise. He turned back to Snape. "Hey. Are we still going in disguise or something?"

"Yes, of course," Snape said dismissively. "Not here. We will Apparate to a neutral location, and then I will need to explain to you where we are going. Are you ready?"

"Just a second," Draco said. Then, over his shoulder, as he turned back to Harry, "Look away,

please, unless you want a show."

Snape glared furiously, but turned away. Draco put his arms around Harry and Hedwig both - but she fluttered up, out of Harry's arms, and landed on the ground a few feet away. Harry's arms went around him and they kissed for a long moment, just on the lips. Draco pulled away to whisper, "I'll be back soon," in Harry's ear. "Promise."

"Okay," Harry said, and nodded hard, as though that would convince him. "Okay," he repeated.

He looked so forlorn, standing there, that Draco had to kiss him again. "Alright. I have to go," he said quietly. He turned to Snape. "I'm ready," he said, louder.

"Good." The word was terse. "Come here."

Draco pulled his hand out of Harry's and walked over. He just saw Hedwig return to Harry's shoulder out of the corner of his eye. Snape spoke again. "Do you know where Dover is?"

"Of course," Draco said.

His eyes were still on Harry when he Disappararated.

* * *

Dover was foggy. Snape was silent as he led the way down a lane in its outskirts. "There is a place here which is Undetectable," he said. "We will disguise ourselves there, where we are guaranteed that no one will see us."

"Okay," Draco said. Snape's tone was already normal again. He only seemed to get particularly nasty when Harry was around. Interesting. Had he really hated Potter Senior that much?

The room was small, but adequate for their purposes. Several spells later, Draco was a wavy-haired brunet with a larger nose, fuller cheeks, and crooked teeth. Lovely. Draco winced at his reflection and turned quickly away. Snape hadn't changed Draco's body at all, so that his clothes would still fit. A thoughtful touch. Snape himself was a non-descript looking,

sandy-haired bloke with a decidedly smaller nose and, of all things, an Irish accent. Odd. Draco had tested his voice and found it to be more or less the same - as was Snape's, before the accent.

"Do we get code names?" Draco asked, half-kidding.

Snape gave him a patronizing look. "No. We will not be speaking to anyone. If someone catches you, Disapparate at once. Return to the camp. Avoid speaking at all costs."

"What are we doing?" Draco asked.

"Watching and listening only," Snape said. "I believe that there are some Death Eaters located around Inverness. You will have to Apparate with me; I cannot describe it thoroughly enough to give you precise coordinates. Dumbledore wants to know where they are, how many there are, who is there, and so forth. You recall your listening-enhancing spells?"

"Yes," Draco said. He hesitated, but wanted to know. "Do you think that my father will be there?"

"I do not know," Snape said, giving him a quick look. "You will not behave foolishly if he is?"

"…No," Draco said.

Snape fixed him with a stern look. "Malfoy. You are here to act as my second. Nothing else. You will stay behind me at all times, unless we are backing up, for whatever reason. Do you understand? You will cast no spells other than those I instruct you to use."

Draco nodded. "Okay. Got it."

"I will most certainly discipline you if I consider your actions to be - "

"O*kay*," Draco said, exasperation winding into his voice. "I've *got* it. I won't act out."

"Good. Step this way, please." Snape gestured to the patch of floor immediately beside him.

* * *

Well, the countryside around Inverness certainly was lovely, if nothing else. It had been six hours, and so far, they'd come up dry. After awhile, Snape announced that it was time to eat, and found a patch of moor. "Have a seat," he said. It was not quite a request, but probably the best he could do. Draco sat.

They had not conversed the entire day, save for tiny bits of information Snape would toss him from time to time. Snape conjured a small fire and began heating water, for tea, Draco presumed. Somehow, it was possible to conjure coffee that tasted like coffee, but it was not so with tea. Draco also privately held that British wizards were far too fond of the entire tea-making ritual to give it up in favour of a magical substitute.

Snape drew out scones and some cured beef, offering them silently to Draco. Draco took them curiously; travel fare, he supposed. "Thanks."

A nod, and Snape turned his attention to eating. Draco felt that the silence was half-companionable and half not - like he was intruding on Snape's privacy, somehow, but that didn't make sense - the professor had *asked* him to come, to spy with him. "Did Dumbledore make you ask me to do this?" he asked, the idea coming into his head just then.

Snape was busy trying to fit some of the meat inside his scone, which was crumbling. "Why do you ask?"

Draco shrugged. "Just wondering."

Snape gave a sharp poke with one long finger, then took a crumbly bite. He chewed for a long minute, then swallowed, brushed crumbs away, and said, "Yes. I did not feel it was necessary. But - as it is, I was… pleased that you were among my choices for seconds."

Oh. That was nice. "Really," Draco said, letting the doubt hang in his tone.

"Mmm." Snape took another bite and scanned the horizon.

"You hide that well," Draco said dryly.

Snape jerked his chin toward the food in Draco's hands. "Eat. We do not have long to stop here."

Draco balanced the bits of meat on his knee and broke off a bit of scone. It was chilly and rather damp, and he was uncomfortably cold. The water was boiling gently. "Is that for tea?" he asked.

"What? Oh, yes," Snape said. "Hold on."

"If you tell me where it is, I'll make it," Draco said, looking at him.

Snape considered. Then - "Fine," he said. "Left outer pocket. It's loose, so you'll need the strainer, too."

"Cups?"

"Conjure them."

"Right." Draco did just that, then reached for Snape's bag and found what he needed. After a bit, there was tea. "Sugar?"

"You'll have to conjure that, too, if you want it. I take mine black."

Draco made a face. Gross. "Okay." Conjured sugar just never came out well, somehow. He tried honey, and that was alright. "So." He took a sip. "Can I ask you something?"

Snape got a long-suffering look on his face. "What?" he asked, his scone-hand hovering halfway to his mouth as he looked suspiciously at Draco.

"I was just wondering why you hate Harry so much," Draco said carefully, hoping Snape wouldn't explode at him. "I mean, I presume it has something to do with his father, right?"

For a second, he thought Snape *was* going to blow. But then the older man appeared to change his mind. "Yes," he spat. "I hated his father. As he hated me."

"Why?"

That earned him a glare. "That is none of your business." The tone was cool, aloof despite the glare.

Draco shrugged. "I'm just asking," he said. "It just seems like James Potter must have done something pretty phenomenally bad for you to still be this bitter about it all these years later. I mean, I thought it was great, back in my earlier years especially, when you were so… unfair to Harry in class, and stuff. But the older I get, the more I wonder why. I don't think Harry ever stood a chance with you, that's all. So, it must have been his father. I know you went to school with him." He paused, knowing that the next name he would say would almost certainly push even more dangerous buttons. "And Sirius Black, too."

Snape almost spilled his tea on himself. "Please do not mention that man," he said stiffly, his features almost immobile.

"He's *dead*," Draco said. "They're both dead. Doesn't that change anything?"

"Nothing changes the past," Snape said stubbornly, and took a sip - it must have been scalding; he winced and exhaled sharply.

At least he was talking. That was something. "So, what was it, then?" Draco prodded. "Did they gang-rape you, or something? Because *that* I can see being that bitter about. Did they kill your parents? Your pet? Were they the ones who volunteered you for Death Eater service? What was it?"

Snape's face had gone white with rage. "How dare you!"

"Because those things," Draco said firmly, ploughing resolutely on, "would all be worth that much hatred, I guess. But somehow, I can't see two Gryffindor pranksters doing stuff like that to you."

"They made my life a living hell! Them and the bloody werewolf," Snape hissed.

Werewolf? Oh, right - Lupin. "How so?"

Another glare, coupled with a furious bite of scone. "They never stopped making fun of me, making sure I knew how very out of place I was - because my family did not have much money, because they got better grades than I did - because they could fly well, and I - excelled in other areas. They were the in-crowd; I was not. No, none of it is earth-shattering - but my entire youth was miserable because of it."

"And your entire adulthood as well?" Draco asked quietly, almost holding his breath.

Silence. Snape picked out one of the bits of beef and ate it.

Draco ate one of his, too. It was good; rather salty, but overall, quite passable. "Because it seems like you're holding on to a lot of stuff and applying it against someone who doesn't deserve it. Oh, I know Harry's broken scads of rules - but is any of it *really* because he's malicious, or means to inflict harm on anyone?"

"Just because you have suddenly become the president of the Harry Potter Fan Club does *not* mean that I have to subscribe as well!" Snape snapped. "I am entitled to hold my own opinions."

"But your opinions aren't justified," Draco pointed out gently. "You're the one who told me that I should try to get along with Harry since we're on the same side now. Doesn't that apply to you, too?"

"I have not been on any other side since before you were born," Snape said, his voice stiff again. He was obviously uncomfortable with talking about his former Death Eater status. "And who made you my bloody psychologist?"

"Nobody," Draco said coolly. "I just want you to stop being such a prick about Harry, alright?"

Snape didn't say anything for a long time. Early evening was settling around them. "Come," he said at length, draining his tea and packing up his bag. "We must be on the move. We cannot be

caught out in the dark."

Draco untangled his stiff legs and stood up. "Okay."

Snape began to walk again, and Draco followed.

* * *

It was evening of the second day, and Draco had just finished setting up the tent. He was tired and cold and sick of being out here, frankly. It felt like a lot longer than two days. Snape was hovering over the small, charmed-to-be-smokeless fire, cooking. Draco was starving. They hadn't found anyone or anything yet, and he was longing, strange as it seemed, to go back to the camp. And to Harry.

He'd resolutely kept himself from thinking about Harry all this while, so far, because it honestly *was* distracting. Besides, he would just drive himself mad. He could feel the ache of missing Harry after only two days; no matter how firmly he kept his mind on other things, it was always there, somewhere below the surface. An image of Harry's face, just before Draco had Apparated, came into his head. Draco squeezed his eyes closed. *No.* He turned away from the tent and went over to Snape. "Let's talk about Krum," he proposed.

Snape looked up. "Krum," he repeated thoughtfully. "Yes. What have you learned?"

"He's no threat," Draco said. "He comes from a similar background to mine. He came to Dumbledore for protection and a sincere desire to help in the war. He's lonely and friendless, too. He also came partly because of Granger, and he's been pretty upset since she finally started dating Weasley."

Snape made a thinking noise. "Go on."

"I don't get any deceptive vibes from him," Draco continued. "It's just prejudice against Durmstrang. A lot of his graduating class went to the Death Eaters, so it was more of a big deal if you *didn't* - I mean, he wouldn't have had any of the pro-Dumbledore stuff to contend with if he'd wanted to join the Death Eaters, so I don't see why he wouldn't have if he'd wanted to. But he didn't, and now he's here."

Snape nodded slowly. "I trust your perception," he said, staring into the pot of whatever it was he was preparing.

Draco's lips twisted. "Except when it comes to Harry," he said, then got up and went back to the tent.

Snape didn't call him back.

Draco came out about twenty minutes later, when Snape announced that dinner was ready. They ate in silence, at least until the end. It was Snape who broke the silence. "A question," he said.

"What?" Draco stared off into the darkening Scottish moors and wrapped his arms around himself, shivering.

"How long have you know that you… preferred males?" Snape asked. His voice was even, but Draco was willing to bet that it had taken the better part of his nerves to ask.

"Oh, I don't know that I ever knew that I didn't," Draco replied, easily enough. He shrugged. "Women just never really did it for me, I guess. As long as I've been thinking about sex in general, it's been men."

"Ah." The word was carefully phrased, betraying nothing.

Draco didn't look at his former head of House. "So, is this where you tell me what a freak I am?" The loch in the distance was gleaming bluely under the rising moon.

"Hardly," Snape said dryly. "You mistake me. I merely wondered why you chose Potter. Nothing more."

Draco took a deep breath. "Do you really want to know?"

A pause. "If you want to tell me," Snape said, less certainly than usual.

"Well… apart from finding him rather attractive, there was always just this - I don't know - something about him. I couldn't stop thinking about him, pretty much from when we first met. I know I hated him. Or thought I did. No, I did. I definitely did. But - there was always something between us. I was never just indifferent to him. And then we kept running into each other in the Owlery this spring. Those times weren't ever really good, to be honest, but I guess we started talking more and fighting less. It was just - I don't know." Draco took another deep breath. It felt so odd, talking about it, but he was so hungry for Harry's presence that talking about him almost helped. "I don't know when I started liking him, exactly, but I did. And I *knew* he liked me, but he wouldn't give in for the longest time. So, if you're going to be mad at me for distracting the Boy Hero, then go right ahead. But I don't regret it for a second. I've… I'm happy with him. I don't think I've ever been really happy before." Draco ran out of words and glanced at Snape.

Snape was staring at either his hands or the ground. After a long moment, he said, "I see."

The silence grew. Draco was feeling defensive, just waiting for Snape to attack, or worse, just start applying the scorn. When it didn't happen, Draco prodded. "So, what's your story, then? How come you aren't with anyone?"

Snape went rigid.

"I know it's none of my business," Draco said, biting his lip.

"It most certainly is not."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"I… do not want to."

"That's okay," Draco said. At least he'd turned the tables; they were talking, or not talking, rather, about Snape now and not him.

Snape stared off. "You… love Potter?"

There was a funny sort of clenching in his chest. "Sounds pretty un-Slytherin when you put it

that way," Draco said.

The dark eyes were fixed on the glittering loch in the distance. "Answer me."

"Yeah, I do," Draco said quietly. "Going to laugh?"

Pause. "No," Snape said finally. Then, almost too quietly to hear, he added, "I think I am jealous, rather."

Surprise. "What?"

A long silence fell, and Draco didn't provoke the other again. At length, Snape said, "The thing is… it took me quite awhile to realize, myself."

"To realize what?"

"I… prefer males as well," Snape said, the last few words coming out quickly, as though he were trying to make them unintelligible.

Draco was tempted to laugh, but managed not to. "Really?"

"I… yes," Snape said, still looking decidedly elsewhere.

"So - have you ever - ?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"It's never too late, you know," Draco offered. "You could always - "

"And I will *not* resort to propositioning werewolves," Snape added sullenly.

What the fuck? Then it clicked, and Draco laughed before he could prevent himself. "What, *Lupin*?" he asked in disbelief. "You like Lupin?"

"No, I do not *like* Lupin, as you so juvenilely term it. I merely - never mind." Snape shut his mouth with a nearly audible click.

Draco was grinning, but it was okay - Snape was still determinedly finding the too-dark-to-see landscape with a very fixed interest. "It's fine with me if you do," he said. "But hey. We don't have to talk about this any more, if it makes you uncomfortable. I appreciate your having told me."

Snape nodded, too quickly. The silence stretched out again, but it was more companionable this time. Draco was still reeling somewhat from Snape's confession. Then Snape spoke again. "Malfoy," he said. "What are you going to do in September? Can you handle being away from him?"

A different tightness gripped his chest now, and Draco almost felt the need to gasp for air. "I - don't like to think about that," he said, his breath quickening.

"You should," Snape said. "Not like it. Do it. You will have to deal with it soon."

"Snape - we've been dating for less than a month, and that's about as far away as September is. I don't know. I just don't know. I can tell you that I hate the thought of it with all of my being." Draco forced himself to calm down, shoved the feeling of panic back down into his belly. "I won't do it, if at all possible. I've been thinking about talking to Dumbledore when we get back."

"He will not allow it," Snape told him, quiet and resolute. "We have spoken about it. He is adamant."

Disappointment and shock bored into Draco's abdomen. "Are you sure? Is that because you told him not to?" He definitely sounded accusing, but he didn't care.

"No," Snape said curtly. "He had already decided." He paused. "I am sorry."

Draco buried his face in his hands. "Fuck."

"So, best that you start thinking about it," Snape advised, not unkindly.

"I… fuck. Fuck!"

"Malfoy," Snape said, his tone warning.

Draco didn't care. He did *not* want to think about that. *Don'twanttothinkaboutitdon'twanttothinkaboutitdon'twanttothinkaboutit.* September was… three weeks away. Shit. They had three weeks, and then all hell was to break loose.

Snape stood up. "I will take the first watch," he said. "Go and get some rest."

"I can watch," Draco mumbled into his hands.

"No, you cannot," Snape said, with a touch of sneer that made Draco loathe the fact that he'd just told Snape, of all people, that he loved Harry. "You are clearly hampered by this information and your own emotions. Go and sleep it off. I will call you in five hours."

The shame just piled onto everything else, and Draco was almost blinded by it all as he stumbled toward the tent, not caring about anything any more. He crawled inside the tent and into his sleeping bag without taking his clothes or shoes off and, lying still, curled on his side and wished with all his might that Harry was there. Just to talk about it and reassure each other. It didn't help, knowing that Harry was far away and probably asleep at the moment, in his own tent, while *their* bed in Draco's tent was empty and cold. Harry didn't *know*, and until Draco and Snape found some Death Eaters, they would not be returning.

In three weeks, it could all be over.

He was too depressed to even cry.

* * *

Snape called him before it was light. Draco sat shivering in the chill morning hours, drinking cup after cup of coffee, trying to keep awake. There wasn't a sound to be had. And, when it was time to wake Snape, Draco had managed, while keeping his face perfectly grim, to demand that they look somewhere else. The moors were deserted.

To his surprise, Snape agreed.

* * *

The next afternoon, they stumbled into a veritable rats' nest of Death Eaters, close to the coast. They were in a meeting. It was just as Draco had imagined; Snape crept forward and cast as many listening-enhancing spells as possible. Draco kept still and quiet and huddled in the brush, listening.

He never heard the footsteps behind him, but there was suddenly a wandtip digging gently into his neck. Draco froze.

"Well, well," a familiar-sounding voice said, sounding amused. "The hair and the face are different - but gods, you'd have to work hard to conceal that body, Draco Malfoy. Stand up and turn around. Slowly."

Draco closed his eyes in a moment of horror. Blaise Zabini. He couldn't yell for Snape - he'd be heard, and give Snape's position away, as well as his identity. And Zabini would most certainly attack, or worse. Draco stood. Slowly. And turned around.

There was only one thing to do. He took advantage of the fact that Zabini had allowed his eyes to wander down his front - and Disapparated.

Back to the camp.

A/N: So, whadja think? Tell! :)

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Chapter: 19

Chapter 19: Returning Home

Draco Apparated to the place right outside the staff tent. He got his bearings and turned to the tent immediately, beating at its outer flap. "Professor Dumbledore!" Never mind the other thing with Dumbledore - he'd talk about *that* later. "Dumbledore!" he repeated, louder.

Dumbledore appeared in the opening. "Malfoy," he said, and looked gravely concerned. "Where is Snape?"

"Still out there, sir," Draco said. His heart was pounding with adrenaline, but he only became aware of it then. "I was caught. Blaise Zabini. I had to Disapparate - he told me to, if anything happened. But I have to go back and warn him, or something. I just wanted to check with you first."

"Good lad," Dumbledore said approvingly, though he looked no less worried. "Where, precisely, were you?"

Draco shook his head. "I don't know, exactly," he said. "Somewhere near the coast is all I know."

"Give me one moment, and I will go with you. Can you Apparate us both?"

The steely eyes were fixed on him. "Of course," Draco said.

"Good." Dumbledore disappeared into the interior. He was back within seconds. "Let's take those glamours off you. We'll do a Disillusionment instead. Are you familiar with the concept?"

"Yes," Draco said briefly, and waited for it. There it was, that cold, trickling feeling. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "Stay behind me."

"I will."

* * *

When they reappeared, Zabini was nowhere to be seen. Draco nodded toward the place where Snape had last been. Dumbledore nodded silently, cast the spell to make his footsteps inaudible, then began to stalk softly in that direction. It did not take long for them to find Snape, even disguised.

Dumbledore did something tricky with his wand, and a golden feather suddenly appeared in front of Snape's face. Draco watched as Snape's shoulders jerked, startled, and then a hand came up and grasped the feather. Snape turned around, saw them. Or Dumbledore, at least. Draco noticed that his body appeared to be part of the grassy field now.

Dumbledore beckoned. Snape cast a careful look over his shoulder, then crept toward them. When he was within hearing range, Dumbledore held up one hand to prevent questions, and said, "Disapparate. Back to the camp."

"Malfoy - "

"Is right here," Dumbledore said, patting Draco on the shoulder.

"Our camp - "

"Where is it?"

"I can take us there."

"Later," Dumbledore said. "Is there anything important or identifying there?"

"No."

"Then, later," Dumbledore reiterated. "Go."

* * *

They were outside the staff tent again. Dumbledore took the spell off Draco. Snape was breathing deeply, and looking at him. "What is going on?" he demanded.

Draco glanced at Dumbledore. "I got caught," he said, hating having to admit it. "By Zabini. He must have had his footsteps charmed; I didn't hear him at all."

"Did he recognize you?"

Draco winced. "Yes."

Snape cursed, softly. "Did anyone else see you?"

"No. Not to my knowledge, at least."

"I must find him," Snape said, to Dumbledore now.

"Not now," Dumbledore said firmly. He looked at Draco. "How did Zabini recognize you? Were you speaking?"

"No."

"Then how - I saw your disguise," Dumbledore said, frowning.

Draco felt his cheeks heat. "He - uh - recognized my - er, my build, sir."

Snape caught his eye, took note of the blush, and got an obnoxiously knowing look on face. Draco recalled that he had firmly attested to not having fallen for Zabini's wiles, the last time they'd talked about it. *Better amend that.*

Dumbledore stiffened slightly, and Draco suspected that *he* got it, too. Damn. "Ah," he said. "We will have to make a note of that in the future. Severus. Debrief me, please. Inside."

"Sir - " Draco said, holding them back.

Dumbledore turned; he'd already been making to go. "Yes?"

"Our things," Draco said. "I just don't want them stumbling into anything that might give Snape away."

Snape caught his eye again, and Draco almost caught a subtle hint of pride. "He has a point," Snape said, to Dumbledore, though his eyes were still on Draco. "Can we not just go back quickly? We can have it packed and be gone within minutes."

Dumbledore wavered. Then, "Fine, go. But return as quickly as possible, Severus - that area is no longer safe."

"Yes, sir." Snape looked at Draco. "Ready?"

"Yes."

* * *

The only words they exchanged were brief. "I'm sorry," Draco said, as he spelled his sleeping bag to roll itself.

Snape didn't look at him. "What for?"

"Being recognized."

Snape straightened, and looked him straight in the eye. "You realize that not having told me

about your… relations… with Zabini - could have seriously endangered us both?"

"It only happened - well, twice," Draco admitted, wincing at the memory. "After you and I had talked about it, not before. I had all but forgotten about it. Zabini's an oversexed monster - only he would recognize someone from the back, crouching, with a completely different face and hair and everything."

Snape gave a silent nod, accepting this. "Yes," he said shortly. "Alright. If we could step out of the tent, I will shrink it and we can go."

"Deal," Draco said, and followed the other out.

* * *

In front of the staff tent again, for the third time that afternoon. "Do I need to stay?" Draco asked.

Snape was busy taking his own glamours off. "No," he said, shaking his once-again-dark head. "I think not." He checked the time. "It is nearly dinner," he said. "I expect you will want to - " he stopped, looking at Draco.

He nodded. "I do," he said. There was a short pause. "Thanks."

Snape was already waving it away. "Just go."

* * *

Draco walked toward the tents, unsure as to where, exactly, Harry would be. And should he risk trying to find Harry in his own tent? There were people about, but not a lot. Perhaps he should just wait outside the lodge until Harry came for dinner. This idea appealed, so he went to his own tent in the meanwhile.

There, he unpacked, changed, applied the showering spell about three times over, checking the time constantly. Finally, it was nearly time for dinner. He went to the lodge and waited outside,

nervous that someone would see him and ask what he was doing. However, salvation came, in the form of the Weasley twins, no less.

"Malfoy!" Fred said, in a tone of surprise. "You're back!"

"Yeah," Draco said.

"How was it?" Fred asked. "We heard you were off doing something dangerous with Snape."

"What?" Draco was confused. "How did you know?"

"Guesswork, mate," George said, clapping him on the shoulder. "No one said anything, but you were gone, and Snape was gone, and Harry's been looking like his dog died all week. So, it was obvious."

Draco felt his features rearrange themselves into a guarded look. "Was he?" he asked - good, he sounded neutral. Surely the *twins* didn't know!

Fred and George exchanged a quick look as people continued to stream into the lodge past the three of them. Fred leaned in then, conspiratorially. "If you're paying attention even remotely, and open to the possibility, then that's not all that hard to guess, either," he said, lips hardly moving.

Draco felt his cheeks go hot, his ears burning. "H - how long have you known?" he stuttered, cursing himself for even admitting it.

Another exchange of glances. "About a week?" George guessed. "Something just twigged in our brains, that's all. How long have you been back?"

"I just got here," Draco said, thoroughly disconcerted.

"Seen Harry yet?"

"No," Draco said stiffly, attempting to re-gather his dignity. "I'm waiting for him."

Fred frowned. "Out here, where everyone can see? That won't do. Georgie, go and get Harry, would you? He's probably moping in his tent, with Granger hanging about and trying to get him to come and eat."

Draco bit back a smile. That rang true.

George nodded. "Sure thing," he said, grinning at Draco. He turned and jogged off toward the tents.

"So," Fred said conversationally, leaning on the lodge wall, as Draco was doing. "Harry, huh? I'm kind of surprised you admitted it."

"Me, too," Draco confessed, before he could stop himself. There was just something so open and inviting about Fred's open, friendly expression.

"Didn't see *that* coming since your first year," Fred snorted, grinning.

Draco glared. "Well, *we* didn't," he said.

"Obviously." Fred smirked. "Hey, don't worry, mate. We're totally down with it all. Did you know one of our brothers is gay?"

"Percy?" Draco asked. Fred nodded. "Always assumed he was," Draco said coolly. "Does W - Ron know?"

"Yeah, but he won't talk about it," Fred said, shrugging. "But you know George and I - we're the black sheep of the family. We don't care about shit like that. If you and Harry are both happy, then good."

Draco nodded, not quite sure what to say.

"Speak of the devil," Fred said in a different tone, and shot a grin at Draco. "We'll leave you two alone. Everyone else should be in there by now." He caught George's eye and nodded, and they disappeared.

"Draco!" Harry was running, and Draco caught him by the arms, grinning foolishly. Harry hugged him fiercely, and Draco didn't even think about being embarrassed as he clung back, although he did feel a bit stupid about how relieved he was. *He's still here. He still loves me. Gods.*

Harry pulled away and kissed him, hard, without even looking around first. When they broke apart, Draco *did* look, and there was no one there. "I missed you so much," he confessed, biting his lower lip.

Harry shook his head. "At least you were somewhere different," he said. "I was going *mad* here, doing all the same stuff, except without you. I can't believe it was only four days. Four days, you prat! You said it would be two or three! I was worried *sick*!"

"You sound like Granger," Draco said, grinning again. He suppressed a sudden, mad urge to do cartwheels.

"Shut up," Harry said, and kissed him again. This time, it lasted several minutes, and they were both gasping when they came up for air. "Did you really miss me?" Harry asked, his eyes half-lidded, his tone low and soft.

"You have *no* idea," Draco said wryly, pushing his fingers into Harry's hair. "Hey. Are you hungry?"

"Only for you," Harry murmured back, lips hovering above Draco's.

"Likewise," Draco said. "What say we skip dinner?"

"I have crackers in my tent."

Draco laughed. "So do I," he said.

Harry's hand slid down his arm and into his hand. "Let's go."

* * *

"Four *days*," Harry moaned. "Fuck, Draco, do you have any idea - "

"Of course I do, you git! Take your socks off!"

Harry waggled his eyebrows in an attempt to be seductive, but he only really looked mischievous. "Thought you liked me with only my socks on."

"Well, yes," Draco conceded. "But I like you so much better with not *even* your socks on."

Harry laughed again; he seemed full of laughter and energy since they'd been reunited. He reclined on his elbows and balanced one calf on the other knee. "Take them off with your teeth," he said.

Draco stared at his lover for a long moment; Harry's cheeks and cock were equally flushed; the latter stiff with need, but Harry's eyes were sparkling with fun and expectation. "Fine," he said, and got down on his knees. "Don't blame me if I end up ripping out your leg hair."

"You'd better not," Harry warned, but his voice was full of laughter.

Draco wrinkled his nose, looking at Harry's be-socked foot. "I can't believe I'm about to have your socks in my mouth," he said. "I grant that I'm in love with you, but still."

"They're clean," Harry persuaded. "Honest. I changed them on our way here."

"You did?" Draco gave him a suspicious look. "Why?"

A mischievous look. "Didn't want to have stinky feet, just in case," Harry said, grinning.

Draco couldn't help but laugh. "Okay, fine," he said. He nuzzled Harry's socked ankle with his nose, then bit at the bottom of Harry's foot, trying to just catch the sock. He succeeded, and began to pull it off Harry's foot. Harry curled his toes, trying to prevent him. It was a contest now, and Draco was determined to win. After a good bit of struggle, he did - Harry's foot was bare, but Draco wasn't finished. He studied the bare ankle in front of him with interest. Ankles were a bit of a weakness for him, anyway - and Harry's were particularly nice. Slender, with lovely definition just above the bone, and Draco had to lick it. He did, and Harry made a surprised-sounding noise. Draco caught his eye and quirked his brows suggestively. When he'd finished that, he moved on to the bottom of Harry's foot and licked up the arch. Harry gasped, but didn't pull his foot away.

"You randy little bugger," Draco said, between licks. "You're totally loving this."

"Yeah, I am," Harry said, unabashed. He wriggled his toes playfully. "Do them, now."

Draco shook his head, smiling, and did as he was told, licking that sensitive bit just at the base of the toes, from the underside. Harry moaned and giggled alternately. When Draco took the big toe into his mouth, the giggling disappeared. Draco glanced at Harry's cock - it was harder than ever, and wetness was oozing from its tip. Harry went to reach for it, but - "No touching," Draco ordered. Harry obeyed, but groaned with need.

Draco released the toe. He couldn't wait any more. "What do you want?" he asked, voice rough with desire.

Harry opened his eyes. "Anything," he said lazily. "Just - no, anything. Please."

Gods. Draco shuddered. "Spread your legs," he said.

Harry's breath quickened, and he complied. Draco returned his attentions to that ankle, then kissed his way from it up the inside of Harry's leg, up to his balls. He licked there, and then the underside of the crimson cock in front of his face. Harry was trembling. Draco gave the head of his lover's cock a short bit of affection as well, then moved up Harry's torso to his face. The kiss was long and wet, even violent. "Please," Harry moaned, fingers tightening on Draco's left nipple.

"Lube - " Draco's hand groped blindly for it, until he discovered it near the pillows. In short

order, his fingers were *there*, and Harry felt tighter than he'd been, the last time. "Harry - you're - fuck, so fucking *tight* - I have to feel that, be in you - "

"Do it!" Harry gasped, spreading his thighs even wider. "Now, Draco!"

A wave of longing and lust rolled over Draco, and there was no possible way he could have refused. He removed his fingers and pushed in, *hard*, and Harry was making those breathy, little sounds that made Draco's brain stop functioning. It was warm - how had he forgotten how *warm* Harry always was? - and it felt so good that Draco's eyes practically rolled up into his head. Harry's legs wrapped around his back, and something in Draco's mind registered that his lover still had one sock on. No time to think about that. They were fucking hard and fast, furious and passionate all at the same time. The times their mouths connected could hardly be termed as kisses; they were brief, hot, wet touches, grabs, strokes, bites - and Draco needed *more*; he was gasping and panting for breath, and it felt like his entire *body* was going to erupt via his cock in a second - and there it was; he was lost and Harry's come was spurting wildly. Some of it hit Draco's face and the rest of it got pretty much everywhere else, but all Draco could think of was his cock, still pulsing inside Harry, his balls emptying themselves wholeheartedly. It felt like he'd just come more than he ever had in his entire life before. With absolutely no regard for the stickiness all over the both of them, Draco fell weakly onto Harry.

Though his lover was still practically wheezing, he grabbed Draco's face with both hands and kissed him properly. Gods, it felt perfect, having that tongue stroking his again. How had he *lived* without it? Suddenly, Draco remembered what Snape had told him and almost froze. He had to tell Harry, as soon as possible. Only, he didn't want to wreck the moment. *Maybe tonight, sometime*.

"I missed you so much," Harry said, and his voice had gone all trembly.

That odd, fiercely protective feeling returned to Draco's belly and swamped him. Not even pulling out of Harry, he turned them both so that they were on their sides. "I missed you, too," he said softly. "Snape just wasn't the same, you know?"

Harry gave a feeble laugh. It was nothing like the one he'd been laughing before he'd come, and Draco wanted to hear that one again. "I hate it that you're going to be gone like that again," Harry said wistfully.

Now is definitely *not the time for that conversation.* "Me, too," Draco said lightly. "Hey. Git. You've still got one sock on, you know."

That gave Harry pause. "What?"

"You do," Draco said, smiling and nodding his head toward Harry's right foot.

Harry laughed - ah, there it was - "Oh, I do," he said, sounding surprised. He laughed again, and narrowed his eyes. "Git. You jumped the gun."

"Had to," Draco smirked. "Someone, as I recall, was begging for it."

"Take it off," Harry pleaded.

"Can't, I'm otherwise engaged at the moment."

Harry giggled. "Oh, right," he said. "I forgot."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "You forgot that I'm *in* you, Potter? I'm offended."

Harry's smile disappeared. "Oh. Well. Maybe if you take it out and take my other sock off, I'll remember again," he said suggestively.

Gryffindor, my arse, Draco thought, lips quirking. "What happens after that?"

A smirk, rather like one of his own. "I'll show you," Harry promised.

And, to Draco's lasting contentment, he did.

* * *

Around eight or so, they emerged from the tent, Draco feeling that he should, by all rights, be smoking a muggle cigarette. Pushing sweat-damp blond hair out of his face, he crouched to zip

his tent shut behind Harry. "So," Draco said. "Walk, or do I have to visit Granger and Weasley?"

Harry debated. "I'm starving," he said. "If we go visit Hermione, she'll make us something to eat."

"And Weasley can just vomit quietly and not-so-subtly on her pillow at the thought of why we missed dinner," Draco said dryly.

Harry grimaced. "I know," he said.

Draco sighed. "Fine, let's go," he said.

Harry didn't say anything, just started walking in the direction of the girls' tents, but his step was particularly springy.

And somehow, that made it worthwhile.

* * *

"So," Granger said, after taking their plates back and Vanishing them. "What happened out there, Draco?"

Harry stiffened at this; perhaps he resented someone else having asked before he could. Or, possibly he was afraid that Draco didn't want to talk about it, at least not to them. Draco didn't really mind, though - in fact, Granger and Weasley's presence might act as a bit of a buffer for when Harry heard about the part involving Zabini. It was already a sensitive point. Draco glanced at the Weasel; he was studying his nails and pretending he wasn't listening - pointless, really, Draco thought, given the incredibly tiny space the four of them were sitting in. Five, rather - Hedwig was preening on Harry's knee.

"Well, not much," Draco said. "Honestly. We were somewhere in - up North. For the first three days, it was just moors, pretty much. We didn't find anything, so we tried closer to the coast. We stumbled almost right into a meeting, and while I was keeping watch, someone snuck up on me. I Disapparated back here, got Dumbledore, and we went back for Snape. Oh, and I'm not supposed to be talking about this, really, so I'll have to kill you if you tell anyone." He smiled charmingly

at Weasley, who gave him an odd look in return. It looked to be a combination of suppressed wrath and reluctant interest.

Harry, too, cast Weasley a worried look, then turned back to Draco. "Who caught you?" he asked quietly.

It was as though he already knew. Draco fiddled with the frayed cuff at the bottom of his jeans, then looked up at Granger and said, "Blaise Zabini."

He could *feel* Harry's body tense. "I thought you were disguised," Granger said, openly surprised.

"I was," Draco said, wincing inwardly. "Snape put glamours on my hair and face… but that's it."

"So, he basically recognized your *body*?" Weasley said incredulously, and tactlessly. "Jeez, Malfoy!"

Draco gritted his teeth even as Granger shot Weasley a warning look. "It's not my fault," he said. "We *did* go to school together for quite some time. How would it have been if you were spying on Finnigan or Thomas? You'd recognize them." *Especially if you had a serious interest in their arses*, he thought, but didn't add.

"Did you talk to him?" Harry asked, in a voice of controlled calm. He didn't look at Draco.

Draco's jaw didn't release any. "*No*," he replied, with only a hint of annoyance. "I didn't say a word. I told you, I Disapparated."

"That was quick," Granger commented, eyebrows lifting.

Draco raised his right back. "Yeah, it was. He was… distracted, for a second, and I took advantage of the fact."

Harry hissed something in Parseltongue, something which didn't really require translation; it was obviously something very negative and pertaining to Zabini - whose name Draco thought

he'd caught in there.

Consideration for Weasley's finer feelings (and possible queasiness) aside, Draco leaned his shoulder into Harry's. "That's all it was," he said, more to Harry than to the other two.

Harry still didn't look at him, but some of the tension drained from his shoulders. "He won't be happy until he gets you," he mumbled.

"That may be," Draco said calmly. "In which case, he'll never be happy. Okay?"

A reluctant smile. "Okay," Harry said, still mumbling at his knees.

Hedwig caused a diversion then, fluttering up toward the door and hooting loudly - clearly demanding to be let out to hunt. Weasley got up to let her out. She gave Harry's cheek a clip of one wing, as though in reprimand, then left.

* * *

It was the next night before Draco brought up the topic of Dumbledore. Harry had obviously been even unhappier than he'd let on during Draco's absence, and was only just regaining his emotional equilibrium. Though he hadn't forgotten Harry's insistence that he share information like that, Draco wanted to give his lover at least a tiny space of peace before the next crisis. Maybe if they went to talk to Dumbledore together, to plead their case - *just stop that*, Draco told himself sternly. *Don't go getting your hopes up. You know they'll never allow it.*

"Harry," he said, late Friday afternoon, "are you busy after supper?"

As he hadn't been assigned to a training group that week, Draco had simply joined Harry's. They were walking toward the tents, going to change before supper.

"No," Harry responded. "Why?"

"Do we still have tomorrow off?"

"Yeah, because the Order is meeting in London, and all the staff have got to be there. Pomfrey's staying, but nobody else." Harry rubbed his eyes, wincing. "I think I just got sweat in my eyes. Ow."

"Good," Draco said, meaning the first part. "I need to talk to you. And it might - uh, take some time."

Harry stopped walking and gave him a stricken look. "What?"

Draco bit his lip. "I don't want to tell you right now."

A tendon in Harry's cheek pulsed, and he crossed his arms defensively. "Are you breaking up with me?" he asked, sounding half-belligerent and half-fearful. "Was I too jealous, about Blaise? I - Draco - "

Draco looked around. They were alone, but they were also fairly close to one of those conveniently dense belts of trees. He grabbed Harry by the arm and propelled him firmly toward the nearest one, where he shoved his lover up against a sturdy tree trunk. "*No*," Draco said firmly. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard you ask, and I've heard some dumb things come out of that lovely mouth of yours over the past several years. *Don't* ask me that again, do you understand?"

"Draco - "

Draco cut him off, kissing him almost savagely. It was hungry and *damn* if he wasn't rock-hard in his jeans already. Harry's fingers curled in Draco's hair, which he suspected was sweaty and gross, but Harry wasn't complaining. After the first few moments of violence, it settled, grew gentler, and finally ended with them leaning against each other, bodies relaxing together. "I love you," Draco said fiercely. "Stop not-believing that."

Harry's eyes were moist behind his glasses. He yanked the glasses off with one hand, scrubbing at his eyes with the back of the same hand. "I'm sorry," he said, embarrassed. "I don't know what's gotten into me. I'm not usually so weepy like this."

Draco reached up a hand and gently pushed Harry's away. "Don't be," he said, and kissed both of

Harry's eyelids. They were warm and salty. "It's okay." He pulled Harry closer still, and they just hugged for a long time.

"What is it, then?" Harry asked, his voice small, from somewhere in the vicinity of Draco's neck.

"I'll tell you after supper. It's not good, but - I don't know. Maybe we can try to work it out or something." Draco moved his hands down Harry's back, and wondered if his lover had gotten a little thinner. "Come on. Let's go eat."

"Okay."

* * *

They were lying on their backs under the stars, out in Field Sixteen, which had fewer trees than some and afforded a fine view of the heavens. Draco had brought his sleeping back from the trip with Snape and spread it out. Harry had brought his own blanket for them to stay warm under. They were holding hands and looking for constellations. Finally, Draco said, "Snape said he'd talked to Dumbledore. They're not going to let us work together once training's over."

Harry's fingers tightened in his. "They have to," he said, after a moment. "What if I refuse to go, otherwise?"

"Harry - I don't know," Draco said dubiously. He had his own suspicions of Dumbledore and co.'s motives in the first place, but wasn't sure how much Harry would accept hearing. "They could force you."

"They can't win the war without me," Harry said stubbornly. "How could they force me to do anything?"

"Imperius," Draco said briefly.

Harry was silent. "Do you think they would?"

It was definitely a less-surprised reaction than Draco had expected, and that was almost worrying in and of itself - Harry obviously knew that Dumbledore could be very conniving. "Maybe."

Harry shifted irritably. "What if we both talked to them? Convinced them that I'd be more distracted if you *weren't* there with me?"

"Do you think they'd go for it?"

"It's always worth a try," Harry said, though he sounded dubious.

"Listen," Draco said, and was somehow glad they were on their backs, so he didn't have to look at Harry to ask this next thing. "If we do get sent different places - I know there'd be weekends and stuff when we *must* both have free - but - what would happen - with us, I mean?"

Harry stirred. "What do you mean, what would happen?" he asked. "Besides us being miserable and doing whatever they've deigned to let us do for the great war effort?"

Something warm released in Draco's chest. "We wouldn't - you wouldn't want to - "

"Spit it out," Harry said.

"I mean - you don't think it would be - well - easier to end things?" Draco asked, the words coming out in a rush.

Harry was quiet. Then - "I thought you said you didn't want to break up with me," he said uncertainly.

"I *don't*. I'm asking what you want." Draco held his breath.

Harry rolled onto his side, letting go of Draco's hand. Propping himself up on one elbow, he looked down into Draco's face, ran one finger down his cheek and onto his lips. "All I want is what I see right now," he said.

Relief. "You're sure?" Draco asked quietly, before taking Harry's finger into his mouth.

"Positive. There is nothing," Harry vowed, "that will ever make me not want to be with you - convenient or not."

Draco looked up into the ex-Gryffindor's earnest face and wondered if something like that could ever be wholly true. But, for the moment at least, he decided to let it go. "Good," he said, and pulled Harry down to himself.

* * *

Snape's owl arrived the next afternoon.

A/N: Feedback? :) Tell me what you thought! :)

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Chapter: 20

Chapter 20: The Special Assignment

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," Draco mumbled, taking the scroll from the tawny's leg. He knew that seal. He knew that writing. "Not already. Fuck. It's fucking *Saturday*. We just got back the day before yesterday. Fuck." He unrolled it, and read. "Shit," he muttered, after the first few lines. "Ohhhh, shit. Harry is going to - oh, fuck."

"Harry is going to what?" A familiar voice asked guardedly, from behind him.

Draco whirled about, heart pounding. "Don't do that to me!"

Harry took the Silencing spell off his feet and stuck his wand back in his pocket, crossing his

arms over his chest. "What am I going to do?"

"Why were you sneaking up me?" Draco demanded, evading the question.

"I saw the owl, saw your hair from a distance," Harry said, shrugging.

"I thought you were hanging out with Weasley."

"I was. I got a funny feeling and came to find you." Harry nodded at the scroll in Draco's hand. "What is it?"

Draco heaved a sigh. There was no way he could either keep it from Harry or break it to him gently. "I just got a special assignment."

"What?" Harry's voice was filled with disbelief. "You just got back from your first - *mission*, or whatever you call them!"

"I know," Draco said flatly. "And you're going to hate it, I guarantee."

Harry flushed. "What is it?" he demanded again.

"Harry - just - before I let you see this," Draco said determinedly, "would you *please* bear in mind that this was *not* my idea, and that I don't want to do it in the least?"

Harry looked guilty. "Okay," he said, but held out his hand. "Can I read it?"

Draco sighed again. "Go for it." He handed the scroll over.

Harry read out loud slowly, his voice growing in volume with each passing word:

"*Malfoy,*

The first part of the weekend's meetings have been concluded, and Dumbledore had devised your first special assignment. You will be leaving on Thursday. Your task is to locate and detain Blaise Zabini. You may use any means available other than the Unforgivable Curses - he is to be brought in for questioning. He is to be delivered safe and unharmed, in good condition.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to owl me. Owls addressed to myself or to Dumbledore will find me.

Sincerely,
Severus Snape."

Harry looked up, and his eyes were full of accusation and pain - pain which made Draco uncomfortable. He felt responsible for it, for whatever reason. The moment grew, and Draco finally shifted uneasily.

"I don't want to go," he repeated.

"Locate and detain," Harry said.

"Yes. In a good enough condition for either some *really* intensive 'questioning', or else out-and-out interrogation," Draco said.

Harry was breathing harder than normal, but he looked to be trying valiantly to contain his temper. "Doesn't sound like Snape really likes it," he said.

"No, it doesn't," Draco agreed slowly.

Harry skimmed the letter again. "They're sending you *alone*?" His voice rose again.

"Sounds like it," Draco confirmed tensely.

Harry looked up. "No fucking way," he said, through gritted teeth. "No. Fucking. Way."

"Harry - " Draco reached for the parchment, but Harry held it out of his grasp. "Give me that."

"You're not going," Harry said, his face turning rather red.

"Harry, I just *got* it - would you let me at least read it again, and think about it myself a bit?" Draco was frustrated. "*Give* me that."

Harry gave it back, but it looked like the range of emotions running through him was so intense that he might explode. He seemed to be trying to think of something to say, and Draco watched him worriedly, half-afraid that Harry was either going to start shouting at the very top of his lungs, screaming himself hoarse, burst into hysterical tears, pass out, or be ill. In the end, though, it seemed that Harry had stopped breathing for a second - he passed out.

"Fuck!" Draco dropped the parchment and took a lightning-fast step toward the ex-Gryffindor, just managing to catch him before his head hit a log. "Harry!"

Harry's mouth was open slightly, his jaw slack.

"Fuck!" Draco grabbed for his wand. "*Enervate*!"

Harry opened his eyes and blinked. "Draco?" His voice was weak.

"Did you eat lunch with Weasley?" Draco asked, in a don't-give-me-any-shit kind of voice.

Harry looked away. "No, we forgot - we were playing chess," he offered feebly.

"You stupid, ridiculous - *Gryffindor* - " Draco shook his head. "Can you get up?"

"Of course I can."

He really couldn't, though - Draco hauled Harry to his feet and Harry all but collapsed on him. "You stupid prick," Draco said roughly. "Have you been doing this all week?"

The silence was telling. Draco got angry. "What the fuck are you trying to pull?" he demanded. "Don't *do* that!"

"I'm just not very hungry, sometimes," Harry protested.

"We're going to my tent," Draco said decisively. "You are going to stay there, and I am going to Granger to get some food for you. I'm not really great at conjuring it. Coffee I can do, food - not so much. And you are going to eat enough of it to make me happy. Understood?"

Harry laughed into his neck. "Love it when you get all dominant," he mumbled.

Oh. Draco shook his head and sighed again, hiding his smile. "Did you stop breathing or something, there?"

"I might have," Harry admitted. He was walking, but leaning heavily on Draco. "Sorry. I guess I just got really upset."

"Let's talk about that in a minute," Draco decided. They were at the tents - Draco had only gotten as far as Field Three when the owl had come. "Okay. In you go. Get into bed, okay?"

"Nowhere else much to go," Harry pointed out, but did as he was told.

"Good boy. I'll be right back."

* * *

It took a bit of persuasion to get Granger to agree not to come back with him, but Draco succeeded. It was just a sandwich, nothing really special, but it was thick and looked nourishing

enough. She'd also managed to produce something that she said tasted a lot like orange juice. Draco had eyed it dubiously, then accepted. She'd told him not to even ask about conjured pumpkin juice, and he hadn't.

Back in the tent, Harry had fallen asleep. There were tear tracks on his cheeks, and the sight of them made Draco's heart clench painfully. *Maybe he would have been better off if I hadn't forced him into this whole relationship.* He shoved the unwelcome thought away and kicked off his trainers. A quick memory scan showed that Hovering Charms were not banned, so Draco performed one on the food as he climbed into bed beside his lover. Harry was facing the inside, toward where Draco usually slept. Draco brought the food down and set it within easy reach. Ignoring it for the moment, Draco reached over and touched Harry's cheek. The tears had dried, but Harry's cheeks were warm. "Harry."

Nothing. "Harry," Draco said louder.

Harry's eyes flew open. "Wh - oh, I fell asleep!" he said, with his usual knack for stating the utterly obvious. "Sorry."

"Don't be." Draco moved closer and put his mouth against Harry's. Harry kissed back hungrily, almost frantically. "It's okay," Draco said, almost as though he would to a frightened animal. "It's going to be okay. We'll find a way. I promise. Just relax, okay?"

Harry nodded, even as panicked tears filled his eyes again. "Okay."

"Shh," Draco said, feeling ridiculously protective. "Come on. You need to eat. When you're training this hard - and I know you, I know you've been working extra hard this week - then you need to keep eating regularly, git. Especially when you skip breakfast all the time. Can you sit up?"

Harry nodded again, swiped furiously at his cheeks and pushed himself up. "I'm *sorry*, I don't usually get like this. I don't know what's wrong with me."

Draco stayed silent, broke off a bit of sandwich and fed it to him. Harry ate the entire first half in silence; Draco just giving him a bit more when he was ready. After that, Draco offered him the "juice", or whatever it was. Harry made a slight face, drinking it. "What's that?"

"Granger's take on orange juice," Draco said, with a knowing look. "It's harder to conjure organic stuff; you're lucky it's even yellowy-orange like orange juice should be."

"True," Harry agreed. A little glint came into his eyes. "Keep feeding me," he requested.

Draco smiled and obeyed. Toward the end of the sandwich, Harry began deliberately going for Draco's fingers rather than the food, and Draco swatted him away. "Eat," he commanded.

Harry did as he was told. After another swig of the beverage, he reached for Draco's face. "Draco - " There was no need to talk, not right at the moment, at least. Draco let himself be pulled into the tight embrace.

"Harry," he said, after a moment - but gently - "You can't freak out like that every time we're going to be separated. We might as well accept that it's started already - there isn't going to *be* any sort of normal routine any more."

Harry's arms tightened around him. "I know," he said, and he sounded so miserable that Draco nearly cried, himself. After a few moments, Harry disentangled himself. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't be making everything harder."

"It's not your fault, either. Don't be sorry."

"I can't help it."

Draco sighed yet again. "No, you probably can't," he admitted.

"Let's talk to Dumbledore," Harry said. "I want to go with you."

"You know he'll never let you."

"Well, you're *not* going alone," Harry insisted. "Maybe they can Polyjuice me as someone else, or something. And you, too, at the very least. No more glamours that Zabini can see through."

"Deal," Draco agreed. "Fine. Let's talk to him. First chance we get on Monday."

* * *

Before that happened, though, Draco owled Snape.

Professor Snape,

I have quite a few concerns with this assignment, which I hope I'll be able to discuss with you in person, and soon. However, I would also like to express some concern over another issue, and request your advice. Harry is extremely exhausted and really stressed out, and I was wondering if it would be too much to ask if he and I could have a day or two off extra. If I'm going to be going on this assignment, I could do with some time to prepare myself, and Harry is simply overworked here. Between the regular training, which is enough, he also has his private training sessions here and there, not to mention the stress of having to deal with his position in this whole war. Before you return, could I ask you to bring this up with the other staff members?

Thank you,

Draco Malfoy.

He didn't tell Harry that he'd sent it.

* * *

Snape returned on Monday morning. Draco was pleased to find that he and Harry had been assigned to the same group again. Besides them, there was also Longbottom (joy), Weasley (again), Thomas (Draco had no feelings one way or the other there) and Lavender Brown (less of a joy, again). Longbottom and Thomas had paired off for Potions Review (they were making

something which Snape said was nameless, but had the power to shrivel your enemy's intestines if he or she was lying). Weasley had looked at Harry, who'd shaken his head and given an apologetic shrug, and Weasley had shrugged back, more or less good-naturedly. Turning to Brown, he'd raised his eyebrows and she'd gone over to stand by him without a fuss.

Once they'd gotten started, Snape came over. He peered into the cauldron. "Have you added the current leaves yet?" he asked Harry, to Draco's surprise.

Harry nodded, half-wincing. "Yes, sir," he said. "Uh - was I supposed to?"

"Yes," Snape said, giving the skies a fleeting appeal for patience. "You were. Do you think you can carry on without Malfoy for five minutes, or will that destroy everything?"

Harry made as though to retort, then looked down at his handwritten instructions again and glanced at Draco. Draco gave him a quick nod and mimed stirring. "Sure," Harry said, jutting out his chin slightly. It was terribly cute, and Draco had to fight the urge to smile.

Snape's shoulders remained in the vicinity of his ears, but he merely sniffed and said, "Good. I must borrow Malfoy for a moment. Malfoy?"

He indicated that they should take a few steps away. When they were out of earshot, Draco asked, "Did you get my owl?"

"Of course," Snape said. "That is what I wanted to talk to you about."

Draco waited, trying to get something from the unreadable look on Snape's face. "So?" he pressed, suddenly afraid that his request had not only been refused, but that he was also in trouble for having made it in the first place.

"They were reluctant," Snape said, "but I believe I have persuaded them. The two of you are to have today through Wednesday off, as I see fit."

Draco could have cheered, but didn't. "As you see fit?" he repeated, carefully. Slytherins *always* read the fine print.

"Yes," Snape said. "And I would like to attend your Potions Review sessions. Both of you. You have far less need of the review, but you will also be the one far more likely to use some of these. And Merlin knows that Potter needs the review - though I am not always convinced that he learned it the *first* time. Otherwise, your request makes sense to me. Upon reflection, it occurs to me that you are both under rather greater amounts of stress than the average trainee here. But do try to avoid telling the entire camp, alright?"

"Sure," Draco said, nodding quickly. He couldn't help smiling now. "Thank you," he said, in profound gratitude.

Snape shook his head. "The staff think I'm either prejudiced toward my former students or else getting soft in my old age. I am inclined to agree."

He was almost smiling, though; it was there somewhere in the lines around his mouth. "No, it's just common sense, that's all," Draco reassured him. "You don't want the little spy and the Boy-Who-Lived quitting on you, right?"

"Potter can hardly quit - "

"Yeah, I know," Draco interrupted. "You know what I mean."

Snape relaxed. "Yes." He looked over at Harry, who was stirring the potion faithfully. "You had best get back to that," he said dryly. "And *I* had best get back to Longbottom before one of my cauldrons melts, explodes, vanishes or becomes tadpoles again."

Draco winced for Longbottom, recalling the incident in sixth-year Potions - which was as far as the ex-Gryffindor had ever gotten. "Right," he said.

Harry looked up in open relief as Draco returned. "Oh good, you're back," he said. "Does it look right?"

Draco glanced in. It was the right colour, at least. It wasn't a potion he knew well, so it was hard to say, otherwise. "I think so." He put his hand on Harry's wrist, lightly. "And I have good news for you," he said.

Harry's face brightened. "Really? You didn't get out of it, did you?"

"No," Draco said, quickly adding - "But it's something else good."

"What?"

"I'll tell you after this. Can you pass me the dragon bile?"

* * *

"So," Harry said, heading toward Field Eight for their next session (duelling, possibly? Draco couldn't remember), "what is it?"

Draco caught him by the elbow. "Well, first off," he said, trying to keep his expression cool, "you're going the wrong way. We're not on Field Eight now."

"What?" Harry looked confused. "I thought we were. And - " he squinted into the distance, where Weasley's red head could be seen bobbing above Longbottom's and Brown's, "Ron and them are going there."

Snape was nowhere in sight. "Actually, according to my schedule," Draco said, pretending to consult a blank piece of paper, "it's time for pre-lunch blow jobs in *your* tent for once."

Harry's eyes goggled. "What? No it's not, you git! We have to go to - "

Draco grinned. "No we don't."

"Yes, we *do* - Draco, I know you're not thrilled about - "

"Harry, shut up," Draco said, none-too-gently, and grabbed Harry by the shoulders to kiss him thoroughly.

Harry struggled for a moment, then relaxed into it, kissing back with his enthusiasm. "Mmm," he said, eyes closed, glasses askew, after.

Draco straightened them. "I owled Snape yesterday and asked him if we could have a bit of time off," he said.

Harry's eyes widened. "You did?"

"I did," Draco nodded. "And he asked the rest and they said yes, too. So - no more training until Thursday. Except for Potions Review."

Harry scowled. "I hate Potions," he said, not unpredictably. "And they're just trying to soften us about separating in autumn."

"Probably true," Draco admitted. He squeezed Harry's upper arms gently. "But I also told them that you're exhausted and stressed out and that you needed a break."

Harry flushed. "Draco - "

"Don't get mad," Draco said, a hint of warning in his voice. "It pisses me off that you're not looking after yourself properly. You're not going to do anybody any favours by dying of exhaustion before you even *see* Voldemort again."

"I can't die unless he kills me," Harry mumbled rebelliously.

"You're missing the point," Draco said quietly, but firmly. "I *care* about you, you jerk. So try not to make yourself a target, okay?"

"That's not what I - "

"I know," Draco said, cutting him off. "But that's what's happening. And I won't hear of it. I'm a Slytherin, you know - used to getting my way and all that."

"Ex-Slytherin," Harry said, but the anger was gone from his voice. His eyes flicked back to Draco's, and he smiled reluctantly. "You're an interfering prat, you know."

"Oh, I know," Draco said airily.

That got a laugh. "So, were you serious about the pre-lunch blow jobs?"

"Harry - I'm never *not* serious when it comes to blow jobs," Draco said, his lip twisting. "I could give you one here and now, if you wanted."

Harry looked around, biting his lower lip. "Not here," he said, reluctantly - as though he'd been seriously considering it. He looked back. "My tent?" he repeated. "Hedwig - "

Oh. She would be sleeping, wouldn't she? "Fine, my tent, then," Draco said. "At least the bigger bed is there, anyway."

Harry snickered. "True." They started to walk, and Harry reached for Draco's hand. "I love you, you know," he said.

Draco smiled. "I *do* know," he said, and squeezed.

* * *

"One of the things that really bothers me here," Draco said, tracing patterns on Harry's tautly muscled belly, "is how jealous you seem of Zabini. Of whatever happened between him and I." He looked up into Harry's already-darkening eyes. "Why?"

"Why?" Harry spluttered. "Isn't it *obvious*? He got you before I did! And you *must* have been attracted to him, if you let anything happen. I know you. If you'd wanted casual sex, you never would have had it with someone you thought was ugly."

"No, that's true," Draco agreed. "So, let's clear a few things up: yes, I think that Zabini is physically attractive. But he's so incredibly revolting, personality-wise, that the very concept of a

relationship with him is utterly out of the question and always has been. He's a sexual predator, and before things happened with him, I complained to Snape about him."

"You did?"

"Yes, I did. Zabini has these little games he plays with people; he'll pick them up and flirt for awhile, and eventually take outrageous advantage of him. The first time something happened with him, he basically tried to attack me because of my having told Snape about him." Draco trailed off, remembering that day in the Slytherin common room.

"What happened?" Harry asked, sounding curious despite himself.

Draco smirked, but it was lacking in its usual energy. "I basically turned it around. I made him suck me off."

"Did he get off, too?" Harry asked, not-quite-accusingly.

"Yes," Draco said. "I just wanked him and then changed it around. You have to remember that this was back when I was really mad at you. Zabini was persistent as hell, and it's not like I had anything better to do. I thought you hated me. And it had nothing to do with you, really."

Harry was quiet for a moment. Then - "What about the second time?"

Draco sighed. "He propositioned me," he said. "He asked me to fuck him. I meant to - I wanted to - but I just couldn't, somehow. I admit to having thought of you. But I still thought you hated me."

"Why would you think that?" Harry asked softly, his fingers moving in Draco hair.

Not looking up at him, Draco stroked the scant trail of soft, dark hair leading down from Harry's navel. "I overheard you telling Granger that, in the library one day. In the restricted section."

Harry's breath drew in audibly as he recalled the occasion. "You were there?"

"Two shelves over," Draco confirmed, glancing up. "I didn't mean to hear it." This was not entirely true, but it wouldn't serve any good purpose to admit otherwise.

Harry sighed. "I'm sorry," he said. "It was never true. I thought - in our earlier years, I thought of you in comparison to my jerk cousin, Dudley. But that was just because you were so antagonizing. I don't think I ever really hated you. I hated *Snape* more than you."

Draco laughed and shifted so that their faces were on the same level again, lying in the crook of Harry's arm. "You did?"

"Oh, sure," Harry said. "He was worse to me than you were."

"Way to burst my bubble, Potter. I tried so hard to make your life miserable."

"Oh, you were mostly successful," Harry assured him, grinning. "Only Snape had more direct power to do that, you know?"

"Is it my turn again yet?" Draco asked, tiring of the subject.

"Could be," Harry said amiably.

Right. The point of the conversation - it had just occurred to him again. "So - Harry," Draco said, "I never *had* any interest in Zabini before, and now that he's openly working for Voldemort, which he more or less admitted in that letter, I'm even less interested. I want to know that you believe me. That you're not going to spend the entire time I'm gone starving yourself and beating yourself up because you think I'm just longing for the opportunity to get it on with him again."

There was a short pause, and then Harry said, "Okay. I won't. But I'm glad you told me about it."

"All you had to do was ask, before."

Harry nodded. "Okay."

"I love how I can never ask you 'have you ever done *this* before?' questions," Draco said, turning himself around, "because I already know all the answers." He grinned, and Harry grinned back.

"What are you suggesting?" Harry's eyes were at half-mast again; his very best attempt at seductive.

"Do you want to try sixty-nining?"

Harry's cock twitched and they both laughed. "Definitely up for a try," Harry said, waggling his hips persuasively.

"I'll say you are," Draco said, giving Harry's cock a soft, sure lick. "Can you just - oh, thanks - *ahh* - that's great. Oh, *fuck*, that feels good."

"Shut up and suck back, you sexy git," Harry's voice came, muffled around Draco's cock.

* * *

At lunch, they sat with the usual, and had to explain their absence from the morning's training session. At least, Harry explained to Granger and Weasley, while Draco explained to the twins.

"They actually *gave* you the time off?" Fred repeated in disbelief. "That doesn't sound like the Dumbledork and his Party Pooper Squad that we all know and love so dearly, does it George?"

"Not at all," George agreed, brows furrowing. "Why do you think they're doing it?"

"Oh - well, because I have another thing this week," Draco said. "I said I needed the time to prepare for it."

"With Snape?" George asked, curious.

"No, by myself this time," Draco said. "I really can't talk about it, though."

"Sure, okay," George said, nodding quickly. "Can you pass the rolls? I'm starving."

"You're always starving, you git," Fred said, grabbing two for himself notwithstanding. George just grinned back at him and took the butter away from his twin.

* * *

Night again. "You don't mind that I'm here again, do you?" Harry asked. He was lying half on Draco's chest, and his hair was tickling Draco's chin and lips.

"Don't be ridiculous." Draco nuzzled the hair; might as well, as it was right there in front of him. "I'd get all miffed if you went back to your tent, after all this."

"I think Hedwig thinks it's *her* tent now."

"Well, and why shouldn't it be? She deserves her own tent."

"And I don't?" Harry asked, laughing and scraping his teeth against Draco's chest.

"Mmm, do that to my nipple. No, you don't, and neither do I, by my reasoning. Oh yes, just like that. Nice." Draco arched his back up, trying for closer contact with Harry's tongue.

Harry laughed at him. "You horny little bugger," he said affectionately.

Draco gave him a lazy smile. "You realize we don't have to get up early," he said.

"We don't? When's Potions?"

"Late afternoon session," Draco told him smugly.

He was rewarded with a predatory smile. "Good," Harry said. Seeming to wake up again, he slid down Draco's body, by-passing his hardening cock entirely, and picked up one of Draco's feet. "You didn't do *this* with Blaise, did you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Draco drawled, for the second time in not so many minutes. He wriggled his toes. "Are you going to - "

"Oh, yes," Harry assured him, and started by massaging Draco's foot. It felt great; his feet were always sore and made alarming cracking sounds first thing in the morning. Harry's hands were strong, his fingers kneading the knots out of the stiff muscles. Upon discovering Draco's ankle, Harry suddenly bent in for a closer look.

"What?" Draco asked.

His lips about a millimetre from Draco's ankle, Harry said, speaking directly to it, "You have the nicest ankles I've ever seen."

Draco was quite pleased by this, for some silly reason. Best not to let on, though. "Have I?" he asked, in his usual (or at least, usual in the past) drawl.

"Definitely," Harry confirmed. He licked experimentally, and looked at Draco, his eyes far too round and would-be innocent. "How does that feel?"

It seemed that his ankles were surprisingly sensitive, actually. Draco pressed his lips together for a moment. "Fine," he said casually.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Just fine?"

"Well, do it again, and we'll see."

Harry grinned and did as he was told, licking harder. "How's that?"

"Again, I can't really tell yet - maybe you should try it harder - "

"Look at your cock, you randy git! You're totally loving this!"

Draco smiled. "Maybe I am, maybe I'm not," he said mysteriously. "I suggest you - *ah* - experiment a little more, there."

Harry began licking the bottom of his foot, and Draco almost let out a foolish squeal of giggling. "Ah! Harry - stop that - ohhhh, wait, don't - mmm - Harry - "

Harry released Draco's toe and gave him that same mischievous look. "What?"

"Keep doing that."

"Oh, now he admits it," Harry said, again speaking to Draco's right foot. "He *likes* it." He looked back at Draco, eyes sparkling. "I'm going to fuck you after this."

Draco groaned. "If you didn't, I'd have to hurt you."

"Well, we can't have that, can we?" Harry asked, his voice suddenly a purr. He picked up Draco's other foot and began lavishing equal attention on it. "And *I*, unlike certain other parties present, am going to do a proper job of this and do *both* feet - "

Draco giggled; he couldn't help it. "Shut up! You know were so horny yourself, you couldn't have waited another second!"

"How can I deny it?" Harry grinned. "Speaking of which, actually…" He dropped the foot and slithered up between Draco's thighs. "What would you think if I did *this*?" He began to lick at Draco's upper thighs, on the insides - it was very sensitive, and the very *suggestion* of Harry's mouth being so close to his cock was maddeningly arousing.

Draco was trying to hold his breath, but he couldn't help it when bits of it escaped him, hissing out between his teeth, or in little puffs through his nose. Harry was licking his balls now, not waiting for a response, and - "Fuck - stop," Draco panted - "I'm going to come - "

Harry just grinned and kept going. "Harry, seriously stop," Draco said, trying to push Harry's head away from his cock. "I can't - "

Harry batted his hands away and licked along the underside of his cock, his tongue very firm. Draco lost the ability to speak, and he almost doubted that he would have kept trying if he could. Just licks, strong and relentless, and then Harry's head plunged down over his cock, sucking hard, his fingers stroking Draco's balls at the same time. It was maybe three or four seconds until Draco came for about the fourth time that day. Harry swallowed, waiting until he was sure it was over, then crawled up to lie beside Draco again.

Draco could still hardly breathe; his eyes were still half-blind from seeing stars. "You're impossible," he said, voice breathier than he wanted it to be.

"That's why you love me," Harry said, seeming pleased with himself.

"Aren't you going - "

"Oh, I will," Harry promised. He showed Draco that he was holding the base of his cock in a tight circle with the fingers of his right hand. "I'm waiting until you're ready again."

"You don't have to, Harry - "

"I know, but I want to. I want you to come again when I fuck you," Harry said.

Gods. The words went straight to his groin. The desire, at least, was certainly there. Draco pulled Harry to him. "Kiss me," he ordered.

"Mmm-hmm." Harry rolled onto him, releasing his cock, and they kissed hard - in every sense. Draco always lost his sense of time when he was seriously immersed in a snogfest with Harry, but it didn't seem that it took more than about five minutes, by which point Draco was ready to go again. Instead of breaking the kiss to tell Harry that, he simply spread his legs, found Harry's hand and guided it down to his opening. Harry got it. They kept kissing, and Harry was sliding his fingers into him, dampened with saliva only. Draco's left hand found the lube, and he pressed it, eyes closed, into Harry's grasp.

Harry released his mouth and went for Draco's neck as their bodies slid together. It was incredible. It was perfect. It was, in some odd sense, like coming home.

And some annoyingly smug-sounding little voice in the back of Draco's mind had the audacity to point out, with some glee, that it was only Monday night. They had two more days of *this* before he had to go. Never mind that they'd said they would talk to Dumbledore tomorrow, upon his arrival. Never mind - any of it, really. This, at least for the time being, was all he really needed to think about.

When they came again, Draco pulled Harry to him and held him close, breathing hard.

A/N: Hiya! So, tell me what you thought. :)

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Chapter: 21

Chapter 21: The Ways of Albus Dumbledore

"Snape," Draco said, when his former head of House answered the door to the staff tent, "we need to talk."

Snape pulled out an antique-looking pocket watch and consulted it. "Now? I am eating breakfast."

"And then you're probably going off to do other stuff," Draco said. "It's Tuesday morning. I know the schedule. I need to talk to you about this assignment."

Snape looked dubious. "We will need considerably longer than I am able to give you between now and my first session."

"Give me what you've got," Draco said. "I *really* need some answers."

Snape sighed. "Were you looking for me alone, or Dumbledore and McGonagall as well? Because they are also in there."

Draco grimaced. "Harry and I are talking to Dumbledore later," he said. "For now, I just wanted you."

Another sigh, nearly theatrical in its magnitude. "Just a moment," Snape said grudgingly, and disappeared into the darker interior of the tent once again. In a moment, he reappeared, holding a plate with three pastries on it. Nodding with his considerable nose, he led the way away from the tent. Draco followed.

Snape conjured two chairs, right there on the grass, and sat down. After Draco had taken his seat in the other chair, Snape held out the plate. Draco looked at it and raised his eyebrows.

"I assume you have not eaten," Snape said shortly. "Have one. And I know perfectly well that your conjured coffee is quite palatable, so serve yourself."

"I don't usually eat breakfast," Draco said, but took a pastry.

"What do you want to know from me, in specific?" Snape asked, ignoring his comment in favour of getting straight to the point.

"Why are they sending me alone?" Draco asked bluntly. "Zabini's in the middle of some sort of Death Eater camp or training place or meeting, isn't he? Why just me, rather than a fully-trained troupe of Aurors or something?"

Snape made a distasteful face, as though Draco's question were both expected and unwanted. "I daresay you will have to ask Dumbledore that yourself," he offered unhelpfully, while refusing to make eye contact.

"Tell me yourself. You must have been there when they decided," Draco insisted. "Give me a straight answer. No one else will. You know that."

"Malfoy." Snape's voice was dead, free of emotion. "You know Zabini's position when it comes

to you."

"What, he'll have me, dead or alive?" Draco asked sarcastically, raising an eyebrow.

Snape looked at him. "Precisely," he said, without cracking a smile. "Hence, you are the perfect choice."

Draco worked that out. "He's on the lookout for me."

"Yes."

"On orders, or on his own volition?"

"Does it matter?"

Draco thought about it. "Not really," he said, suppressing another grimace. "I guess if it's on orders, then he might have back-up and stuff. But again, why would *they* send him out alone, too - to capture an equally untrained enemy? It doesn't make any sense!"

"Malfoy." Snape's voice still had that flat, dead sound. "What are you most interested in at the moment?"

Draco's lips tightened. "Why are you asking? You know the answer."

"So, explain to me how obsessive lust is less of a motivating factor than a military order," Snape said.

"If you're trying to compare what Harry and I have to 'obsessive lust' - "

"I am doing no such thing," Snape cut him off. "I am talking about Zabini."

"So…" Draco struggled to put it into words - "they're basically just *letting* him go after me?"

"I think so."

At last, a direct answer. "But - why aren't they more interested in his training or whatever?" Draco was still confused. "What's so important about letting him just pursue his whims?"

"It has much more to do with you," Snape said quietly.

What? "Me?"

Snape looked over, and appeared to be looking at Draco's trainered feet. "Who are you?"

Oh. The answer slammed into Draco's mind with the force of a physical blow. "This is *Lucius'* doing?!"

A nod.

"Fuck!" Draco exploded. Snape remained silent, his fingers kneading the third of the pastries into fine powder. Draco's thoughts were reeling, and he attempted to master and organize them. "But it still doesn't explain why Dumbledore's sending me out to meet him."

"Malfoy. Be practical. If you are not with your father, who are you most likely to be with? Work it out." Snape shot this all at Draco with less sneering than he might have, but Draco hardly even noticed the tone.

"Dumbledore - and Harry," Draco said slowly, and looked up at Snape, blinking. "That's it. I'm just being used as bait to keep Zabini and the rest away from here."

Snape didn't say anything, and a sick feeling settled into Draco's belly. He was right. If he'd been wrong, Snape would have said so right away. The sick feeling turned half into bitterness. "So I'm really that unimportant," he said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Snape snapped, though he was obviously irritated himself. "Dumbledore

would not send someone he did not expect to be capable of surviving the task. Longbottom, say - the chances of your return are quite high. You will not have to worry about locating Zabini - he will find you, I think. All you need to is be sure that you see him before he sees you." Snape paused. "Does Potter still have his invisibility cloak?"

Draco hadn't thought of that. "I think so," he said. "Would I be allowed to use it?"

"Why not?" Snape asked rhetorically.

"But why can't anyone come with me? I mean, okay, not Harry - I get that," Draco said. "But no one? Granger, even? Or Krum?"

"I am still checking on Krum," Snape said. He looked away, as though not liking the next part. "And Dumbledore thinks that you would stand a better chance of being approached by Zabini if you are alone."

Draco's stomach twisted again. "I hope he doesn't think I'm going to seduce him or something, in order to lure him back here."

Again, Snape was tellingly silent, and Draco mentally cursed Dumbledore to the seven hells. "I see. Well, it's not going to happen," he said flatly.

Snape looked at him, opened his mouth, then closed it again. "I cannot argue with that," he said stiffly. "However - *do* be as persuasive as possible, otherwise. Whatever it takes to distract him."

"It won't take that," Draco said stubbornly.

Snape checked the pocket watch again. "I must go," he said. He nodded toward the forgotten pastry in Draco's hand. "Eat that," he said, rising.

Draco stood, too, and Snape Vanished both chairs. For a moment, he seemed to be trying to decide whether or not to say something further, and finally settled on, "Perhaps you should speak to Dumbledore."

"I will," Draco vowed, through gritted teeth.

"I will see you this afternoon." Snape turned and walked off.

After a moment, Draco collected himself, forcing the omnipresent waves of anger back down, and returned to the tent. Harry was still fast asleep when Draco removed his shoes and clothing and crawled in besides his lover's warm, nude form. It took him quite awhile to fall asleep again.

* * *

Harry woke before him the second time. "Are you awake?" he asked.

The voice filtered through Draco's sleep-drugged body. "Mmm…"

"Don't give me that," Harry said playfully. "It's lunch time! Are you getting up?"

Draco opened his eyes. "Are you?"

"I'm starving," Harry said, grinning apologetically.

Draco stretched luxuriously, closing his eyes again. "Bribe me," he said lazily.

"*Bribe* you - well, I guess I could do that," Harry said thoughtfully. There were a few moments of rustling and shifting as Harry repositioned himself, and then his lips slid down over Draco's firming cock.

"Ah - is the Silencing spell still on?" Draco asked, shoving his fingers into Harry's somewhat-tangled hair.

Harry grabbed for his wand and pulled his mouth off Draco's cock to cast it again. "Is now," he said briefly, before returning to the task.

There was something different about getting head when one had just woken up. It was sleepier, at least at first, somehow more relaxed, and altogether pleasant. Draco allowed himself to revel in it, pulling his legs up to massage Harry's arse with his feet. "Mmm…" was all he said, awash with the incredible sensation of having the pleasure wrung gently from his body. Harry responded by sucking harder, pressing his tongue tighter, the flat of it sliding against Draco's hard flesh. He seemed to know instinctively when Draco needed the pace to increase, when he'd woken up enough to really *feel*, to be grasping after more - Draco sucked in his breath and bit his lip. Harry moaned around his mouthful, and Draco responded by sliding one foot off Harry's arse and under him, rubbing the top of it along Harry's erection. Harry's hips pumped into it, and the rate of his mouth action increased yet again. And there - the curls of ecstasy were spreading through his torso, his nerve endings tingling in a way that made breathing rather difficult - though at the moment, it didn't really seem necessary, anyway. Draco gasped and felt the explosion ripple through him. Harry's tongue and lips gathered, swallowed, held him until just before it became painful, and then let him go.

He hadn't come yet. Draco's mind managed to register this even through the glow, and he hauled Harry up by his upper arms. Harry's mouth was hot on his, and Draco thought he was getting used to the taste of his own come as he stroked the cock in his hand roughly, bringing Harry off without wasting any time.

"Oh - gods - Draco - " Harry panted against Draco's mouth, his breath hot and moist. Harry's hips shook and his body released into Draco's hand. It was even warmer than the rest of Harry always was. Without even thinking about it, Draco brought his hand to his mouth -

"Don't," Harry said, opening his eyes. "You don't have to do that - "

That just settled it. Draco kept his eyes fixed on Harry's and, with deliberate slowness, licked his hand clean. It certainly tasted better than his own, at least to his own sensibilities. When he'd finished, Harry just shook his head, took Draco's hand and pressed a kiss into its palm. "Love you," he murmured, his pulse still audibly pounding in his voice.

Draco smiled. "Still hungry?"

"Yeah. Do you want to go to lunch?"

"Sure. And then we have to talk to Dumbledore," Draco reminded him.

Harry frowned, but nodded. "Yeah, we do," he agreed. "Okay. Let's get up, then."

* * *

"Professor Dumbledore," Harry said, in as formal a tone as Draco had ever heard him use, "can we have a few minutes?"

Dumbledore looked from Harry to Draco and back again. "Why not? Come in." He stood back from the staff tent's entrance to let them by.

They followed the old wizard inside and sat down. It was the same table where they'd been sitting after the incident with the enlarging spell. Draco glanced at Harry before everything started, the heaviness at what he'd learned from Snape that morning weighing on him. Should he tell Harry, or would that just make him jealous and paranoid? Harry's jaw was set, but Draco saw his hands shaking very slightly. Harry clamped them together on his knee and tried to look like he wasn't nervous about this.

This, which was asking Dumbledore for a favour, basically. A really big one. Draco felt a wave of panic wash over him as he realized afresh how much the outcome of this discussion actually mattered to him. He could not disobey a direct order from Dumbledore; he'd sworn an oath of loyalty to the man. And for Harry, running away from Dumbledore was practically suicide, given who he was.

"How can I help you?" Dumbledore asked, including Draco in the question.

Harry recrossed his knees and surreptitiously wiped his hands on his jeans. "We - uh - " he cleared his throat - "we wanted to talk to you about the assignments in September."

Dumbledore's features remained utterly neutral, in a way that suggested to Draco that he'd known exactly why they'd come before anyone had said a word. He said nothing, and Harry looked at Draco.

He didn't lean forward, didn't placate. Only reason would help. "Sir," Draco said, with as much respect as possible, "I think you know what we're here to ask. We just want to discuss the benefits of our working together in the field."

Dumbledore's lips tightened and his eyebrows lifted. "I see," he said, the smooth tone betraying nothing. "And why would you be suggesting that you are more competent at making these decisions than I am, might I ask?"

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Draco grabbed his wrist under the table and squeezed warningly. "I - we work well together. Honestly. Ask any of our instructors here. We have some strengths which are complementary, such as my skill with potion-making and Harry's with some of the defensive techniques. If we were partnered together, we also wouldn't be distracted by the fact that we were apart, either."

Dumbledore leaned back and picked up his cup of tea. Sipped. Appeared to be thinking. Then, "You recall that I have said, very explicitly, that I would not be taking partner requests once the training is finished."

Draco fought the urge to close or roll his eyes. "Yes, sir," he said, his voice steady. "But - "

"Kingsley may well be correct in his - frequent - assertions that exceptions should not be made for the two of you, just because you are both - shall we say - special circumstance students here." Dumbledore was still very calm, but his demeanor was that of aging warrior, not quirky, twinkling-eyed headmaster. Where had that man gone, who'd encouraged them to be together? "In this matter, I am inclined to agree with him."

It was expected, but it still felt like the bottom had dropped out of Draco's stomach. He swallowed and glanced at Harry again. Harry was staring at his hands, his expression somewhere between scowling and morose. Draco was finding it hard to breathe. "May I ask," he began, straining to keep his tone polite, "what you all have against the two of us? We *do* have special circumstances. I haven't even asked you why you're sending me off on a dangerous recovery mission alone and half-trained, or why I have to do this spying in the first place. Harry has *never* complained about everything he does. Why can't we just work together? I understood when the reasoning was about a relationship distracting Harry from his training, but why can't anyone see how it would probably be more distracting if we're separated in a few weeks?"

Dumbledore picked up a spoon and added more sugar to his tea. "Tea?" he inquired, without interest.

"Sir," Harry said, sounding desperate, "you were all encouraging about this before. I - I'm in *love* with Draco. If I'm not with him, I'll think about him all the time. I'm not trying to be a nuisance, or to make threats or anything like that. I just - I want what's best for everyone, too. But just -

please, can't you think about it a bit, before you decide for certain?"

Dumbledore sighed. After another prolonged pause, he looked up at Harry. This time, his eyes were almost sad. "It *is* decided for certain already," he said gently. "I let Kingsley make the arrangements."

Draco's jaw clenched and he was afraid that he was either going to explode with rage or else burst into wild and furious tears. Better the first. He stood up, fists balled at his sides. "Look," he said. "We're not asking for the world here. We're not even asking what in hell's name you have planned for us and our lives for the next several months. All we're asking is that we do whatever we're doing together."

"Please sit down," Dumbledore requested, apparently not remotely concerned with Draco's wrath. He stared at Draco pointedly. When Draco remained stubbornly where he was, Dumbledore continued anyway. "It just isn't possible. We have you working with Snape; it seems to be an excellent arrangement. Harry will be working with Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger."

Draco's jaw dropped. "What?! You'll put him with his two best friends, but not with me? I don't give a flying *fuck* about the spying thing! I'll do *anything* else, just - " He broke off when he realized his rationale was dying, and that he was very close to the humiliation of crying in front of Dumbledore.

"Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said, not cold, but there was an edge of steel to his voice, "this war promises to be difficult for everyone. We need you exactly where you are, doing exactly what you are doing. Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger will be ideal companions for Harry, especially given their history of working together - which the two of you do not have. I apologize for the distress this is obviously causing you both, but I am afraid that the matter is closed." He refolded his fingers. "I would suggest that you go and enjoy the rest of your little break." The tone was almost kindly, and a little sad again.

Harry stood up, too. "Look," he said, and his voice was steadier than Draco's. "I know that the war agenda pushes individual agendas aside. I do. I totally understand that. And I also know that you know how little power I have to actually disobey you. But I have to tell you that if I had any at all, I'd leave camp tonight. With Draco. However, I'm sure you have anti-Apparition wards up all over the place, and I also know that we'd probably get pegged off by Death Eaters within days. But you're making my life miserable. I know that's not your intention, but that's what's happening."

Dumbledore looked into his tea with a very still expression, as though disappointed; Draco couldn't quite tell, and frankly didn't really care at the moment. After a moment of silence, Harry took his hand and they left the tent in silence.

"Mr. Malfoy." The voice called them back, and they both turned. Dumbledore was standing in the doorway of the staff tent.

Draco lifted an eyebrow coldly. "What?"

The smile was definitely sad this time. "Good luck with your mission," he said. "I need to meet with you before you depart. Would you spare me a few minutes on Wednesday evening?"

"What time?" Draco asked, fidgeting. "We play Quidditch on Wednesdays."

"Either before or after would be fine," Dumbledore said politely.

Draco did roll his eyes now. "Thanks, but I have plans for *after*," he said dryly. "After supper, then."

He got a cool nod in return. "I will expect you here," Dumbledore said, indicating the place he was standing.

"Don't count on it," Draco muttered, turning back and pulling Harry with him.

Harry leaned against him as they walked, as though he'd totally stopped caring about people noticing. There was no one around, but still - Harry had never deliberately kept holding his hand out in the open like this before. They were headed for the nearest belt of trees, however, and it would not be far to walk this way. "I feel like crying," Harry said, his voice dull.

Draco stepped into the cool of the glade and pulled Harry against his chest. "So do I," he said, leaning his head against Harry's. His lover's hair was soft against his cheek. His voice was heavy. "I didn't really think he'd let us, though."

"Neither did I," Harry said, "but I was hoping anyway. I guess I didn't even realize how much I

was sort of expecting him to change his mind. And then he didn't, and now I wish I'd prepared myself for that better. I'm just… I feel totally shocked. I can't do all this without you. I don't *want* to. I - we don't know how long it's going to be between assignments, or if we'll ever be off at the same time - it could be *months* between visits."

Draco's arms tightened. "I don't want visits," he said, tasting the bitterness in his mouth. "I just want you. I want to be wherever you are, I want to do whatever you're doing. Maybe I should just do that, and to hell with Snape. He can find a new back-up. I could sneak along on your missions."

Harry pulled away just far enough to look at him, very seriously. "Would you really do that?"

Draco wavered. He hadn't thought that far. "I don't know."

Harry sighed. "You can't. You know you can't. I guess we're just going to have to deal with it. Give me a day to be really upset about it, and then I'll be fine."

"Will you?" Draco asked, pulling Harry closer so that he wouldn't see Draco's face as he spoke. "I won't."

Harry hugged him harder. "I can't stand it," he said softly and honestly. "Just promise me it won't be over when we leave here."

"I promise," Draco swore. "It won't be. Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Me neither," Harry said. "I promise, too. It won't be over."

He pulled back again. Draco's hands were on Harry's upper arms, Harry's hands on his hips. They looked at each other, long and steady, and then moved together for the longest, sweetest, and saddest kiss they'd ever had.

* * *

Wednesday night came all too soon. Draco had been determined to enjoy the day thoroughly,

and by some unspoken agreement, they hadn't discussed September again since right after the meeting with Dumbledore. Wednesday had started with getting up in time for Snape's early-morning Potions review, then going back to bed, waking up, making love several times, getting something to eat, and repeating the entire process, minus the Potions review. Now, at supper, Harry was sitting between him and George Weasley, with whom he was talking very quietly.

Draco had, at least, remembered to ask Harry about his invisibility cloak. Harry had been surprised, as though he'd also forgotten about it, and had agreed at once. It seemed to make him feel better to know that Draco would have it. Draco poured gravy onto his mashed potatoes and struck up a conversation with Granger.

A shadow fell across the table toward the end of the meal. Draco's instincts made him turn before anyone else did. It was Snape. Draco felt his eyebrows lift again; Snape was not normally one to approach a student table. It must be important. "Yes?"

Without preamble, Snape asked, "Would you like me to be at your meeting this evening?"

"Certainly." Draco accepted this without delay. "That would be great." An ally. A damned unfriendly one by times, but any ally was better than none.

Snape nodded curtly, turned and swirled off, exiting the tent.

"Is he going to go with you?" Harry asked. Ah, good - he had Harry's attention again. Draco honestly hated to admit that he disliked sharing for even a few moments. Even with someone as harmless (well, relationally speaking, at least) as George Weasley.

Draco nodded. "Yeah."

"Good," Harry said fiercely, and stabbed his fork into the innocent pile of mashed potatoes on his own plate.

Fred leaned forward. "George reckons you should review your flying, fanged haddock spells before you leave tomorrow," he said helpfully.

Draco shook his head, but had to laugh. "Shut up, you git."

"It could be very useful!" Fred protested, dropping any pretense that the idea had been someone's other than his own. "Very unexpected," he added.

Harry snorted. "That's true," he said, then mimicked a battle situation. "Harry, get down! It's a - no, wait, it's - shit, it's a flying haddock! With teeth! *Hit the deck!!!*"

Everyone was laughing. "They're carnivorous, too," George added, smirking at his twin.

"Are they really? Let's see one, then," Weasley (Ron) insisted.

That fun ended quickly enough when the specimen bit Weasley's neck quite fiercely a moment later, getting blood all over the table. Granger was tutting and showing off her healing spells. The twins seemed quite unconcerned by this. "The only problem is," Fred said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, "that they die pretty quickly, being out of water and all. We haven't quite found a way to fix that yet."

"Well, you'd best get on that," Draco said, rolling his eyes.

Before long, it was time to get up, leave them all, and trudge off to his meeting. Draco left with great reluctance. It was only quarter to seven now; Harry had promised not to start the match without him.

* * *

"So, given all this," Dumbledore was saying, "I would suggest that you stay in the Edinburgh area. Not directly in the city, but there is some very good cover in the hills, and I think that it could be very beneficial. Start by Apparating to the last point where you saw Zabini; it is likely that he might have left enchantments in place to trigger an alert if you arrive."

Draco glanced at Snape; the other was still withdrawn and silent. "Yes, sir," he said, voice completely devoid of emotion. *Hate you.*

"As to the actual detainment," Dumbledore said, "you are, as Snape has said, free to pursue any course other than the Unforgivable Curses. I would avoid magic or physical force; Zabini has proven himself quite capable in terms of stealth at the very least, and I think it would be prudent to assume that his training has been quite thorough. Like your own."

Draco gritted his teeth together. "If not magic or physical force," he ground out, "then what exactly are you suggesting?"

Dumbledore gave him a level look. "Work it out," he said. "You know his weakness. This is a war, Mr. Malfoy. I expect you to behave as a professional operative."

There was a small sound, like someone trying to stifle a cough. Draco looked around curiously; it hadn't come from Dumbledore or Snape, who were in front of him. There was no one there. He looked back at the two older men, but neither seemed to have noticed anything. Right. Back to the point. "If you think that I'm going to cheat on Harry just in order to bring someone in for questioning," Draco said, without raising his voice, "then - "

Dumbledore was suddenly cold. "Mr. Malfoy. You will do as you are told, just this once. You will use what means you have available to complete your assignment. Do I make myself clear?"

Does no one *care about the fact that we're in love, and really quite happy about it?* Draco wondered to himself. Aloud he said, stiffly, "Very clear."

"Good. You are dismissed," Dumbledore said, still cold. Perhaps he thought it was time Draco remembered his place. Or what Dumbledore had done for him. Damn, but how Draco hated that obligation! Oh, for the war to be over and to be free of it already!

Draco got up and walked away.

"Eight o'clock," Snape called after him, hardly raising his voice. "I will meet you at the Apparition point to take down the wards."

Draco just nodded and kept going.

* * *

"Be careful out there," Harry said, cradling Draco in his arms.

"I will be. I promise." Draco moved his puffy lips back into range and dragged Harry's face down to his, one hand on the back of his lover's neck. Their tongues slid automatically together and it never mattered any more whose tongue was in whose mouth. "Are you coming to see me off in the morning?"

"Stupid git," Harry remonstrated.

"Well, you're not much of a morning person, are you?" Draco asked rhetorically, his fingers moving gently in Harry's hair.

"I couldn't possibly not come for this."

Draco looked at him. His eyes were closed, his breathing already slowing. "Okay, then."

Harry's lips curved into a smile. "Make sure you wake me."

"I will."

Draco watched him for a good few minutes, just listening to his lover's breathing getting slower and slower. "I love you," he said, too softly to wake Harry. "Gods, but I do."

He'd thought Harry was asleep. But those lips moved again, the corners sliding away into creamy, hollowed cheeks. "I love you, too." No more than a sigh, hardly above a whisper.

* * *

Eight o'clock, predictably, came too early. But Draco woke with a sense of immediate danger and excitement. He felt ready. He would find Zabini, damn it, and bring him in before anyone could question his skills versus Zabini's in the field of stealth and magic. All of these thoughts happened within the first ten seconds of his being awake. Draco shut off the alarm.

Harry, miraculously, had heard it, and was stretching. "It's time," he said at once.

"Yes. It is." Draco sat up. His small bag was already packed and shrunken, ready to be squeezed into his jeans pocket. He got up and got dressed. Harry did the same, predictably quiet. Draco's heart was already racing with anticipatory adrenaline. He really couldn't believe that he was doing this, all alone. But he didn't intend on fucking it up. Harry was crouching, tying his laces. Draco put his shrunken bag into his back pocket and double-checked that he had his wand.

Harry glanced up. "Are you ready?"

"Ready as I can be," Draco said. Harry accepted his hand, pulling himself up directly into a quick, hard kiss. "You're still coming?"

"Of course." Harry was quiet, but suddenly he smiled. "There's something I haven't told you."

Draco had just let go to open the tent flap with his wand, and this gave him pause. "About what?"

"I can't say," Harry said mysteriously. "You'll find out very soon. Like, right after you Apparate."

Draco went still. "What are you talking about?"

Harry thought. "Actually, maybe I *should* tell you now, to make sure the Apparition works…"

"What is it?" Draco demanded. He had no idea what Harry was on about.

Harry bit his lower lip. "Um… I - well - nobody wants you going alone, right?"

"Right," Draco answered warily, wondering where this was going. "If you think they're going to let you come - "

"Not me," Harry said quickly. "The twins."

A full second passed before Draco's mind got that one. "What?"

"They're going with you," Harry said quietly.

Draco shook his head. "They can't. Dumbledore will never let them. Snape wouldn't, either."

"They can, and they *are*," Harry said stubbornly. "Under my cloak. We've worked it all out. But they don't know exactly where you're going for the first jump, so they'll be Apparating with you. I thought maybe I should warn you, about the extra strain on your energy."

Draco just stared at his lover for a minute. Then, suddenly, he laughed loudly. "You little - *Gryffindor*," he said, grabbing Harry and almost strangling him in a hug. "You devious, underhanded little - "

"Stop calling me little," Harry complained, though Draco could hear the grin in his voice. "I'm *huge*."

Draco moved both his hands to Harry's arse. "True enough," he admitted. "I'll be as fast as I can, okay? And I feel a lot better knowing that I'll have two extremely devious someone's watching my back."

"So do I," Harry said. They kissed again, and then left. Draco felt a thousand times better about this mission than he had about the last. Harry walked so close to him all the way to Field One that their arms were touching.

Only Snape was there to see him off. Harry leaned over and whispered, "They won't talk to you until you get there. But they're here."

Something invisible touched Draco's shoulder from behind him and squeezed, and he couldn't help jumping. "Okay," he whispered back to Harry. Then, turning his head slightly to over his shoulder, he said, louder, "Anyone who doesn't want to see some serious boy-snogging had better look away about now."

Snape made an exasperated-sounding noise and theatrically turned away.

Harry was trying to smile. "So, this is it," he said. "Just come back quickly, and bring that fucker with you, if you must."

"Love you, too," Draco said, grinning, and brought their mouths together. He heard someone (invisible, he was willing to wager) make a *very* quiet gagging sound, which was promptly cut off. He didn't care. Harry's tongue was hot against his, and somehow very sweet, and their arms were wrapped tightly around each other. "I'll be back as soon as I can," Draco promised in a whisper. Harry just nodded, and let go of him.

Draco took a step back. "Apparating now," he said blandly, as though just notifying Snape and Harry of his intentions. He felt two invisible hands take each of his elbows, and consciously boosted the level of magic he was preparing to make the leap.

Snape's eyes were boring into his. "Be careful," he said, a hint of warning in his voice. "Do what you must - no more."

Draco wasn't quite sure if that was supposed to be an endorsement of Dumbledore's plan or a condemnation. "I will," he said firmly, meeting the dark gaze.

He got a nod. "Go," Snape said.

Harry managed a small smile, and Draco couldn't quite bring himself to return it. He Disapparated.

* * *

The moors were windy and appeared completely deserted. Draco did several Dark-detecting spells in close succession. Nothing, at least not at the moment. "Are you two here?"

"Right here, mate," one of them said.

"Who are you?"

"That was Fred," the other voice said.

"Can I see you two?"

Two red heads, no more, appeared. "Actually, we're not planning to wear this all the time," George said conversationally. "It was mostly for the getaway. We reckon you'll need it more than we will. We'll Disillusion ourselves the rest of the time. Except once you actually find Zabini."

"Which we're planning to help with, too," Fred added. "I can't believe those fuckers sent you alone!"

Draco nodded. "I know. Well - I think I know, now, why they wanted me to go by myself, but - "

"But Dumbledore's *totally* out of line for suggesting it," George said, with surprising force. "We don't blame you for standing up to him."

Draco nearly fell over in shock. "What? How did you know about that?!"

Fred grinned ferally. "Give us some credit, Malfoy. We spied on your meeting after supper yesterday. Harry told us about it."

Draco suddenly remembered the stifled-cough sound he'd heard, and the pieces slid into place. All he could do was shake his head. "You two make me dizzy," he said.

"That's only fair," George said practically. He handed the cloak to Draco. "Here. Put it on. We'll Disillusion ourselves now."

"What," Draco asked, slipping the cloak over his head, "are Dumbledore and them going to do when they find out where you went?"

"We don't know and don't really care," Fred's voice said stubbornly. "It's not like he's going to kick us out of the war."

True. Back to business. "So, I'm basically just supposed to look around until I find Zabini or he finds me," Draco said. "How are you two going to follow me if I'm invisible?"

"Just leave your hand out," Fred said. "We'll follow that. And you'll tell us if you decide to doing anything unexpected, yes?"

Draco wavered. "I almost think I *should* be visible, just in case he's looking for me. Well, I *know* he's looking for me, I just don't know how and when he'll find me."

"Sure, whatever you think is best," George's voice came, sounding like he was shrugging. "One question, though."

"What?" Draco shrank the cloak and added it to his tiny, but bulging bag.

"Would you do what Dumbledore wants you to do?" George asked quietly. "Seduce Zabini, I mean. Or not totally seduce, but… you know. Something along those lines."

Draco's cheeks heated. "No," he said belligerently. "What kind of person do you take me for?"

"That's good," Fred's voice returned lazily. "Because we'd honestly have to hex you for it, mate."

A sudden suspicion. "Did Harry ask you guys to come just to make sure of that?" Draco demanded. If it was true, he'd be *very* disappointed in Harry.

"No, not at all," Fred assured him immediately. "We asked him if we could sneak along, and he jumped at the idea. He never even mentioned anything like this, ever. This was purely *our* idea, Malfoy. We didn't want you going off on your own."

Oh. Well, then. "Okay," Draco said. He withdrew a hand drawn map (courtesy of one Severus Snape) and consulted his surroundings. "Let's try over this way to start with."

"Whatever you say."

* * *

Fred and George were handy to have around for quite a few reasons. One was that Draco didn't have to think as much about looking around every three seconds, which allowed him to spend more of his time on Dark-detecting spells. Secondly, George kept renewing the footstep-silencing spell on his feet for him, so he didn't need to think about that, either. Thirdly, they kept him company. It was nice. Between times, the twins were casting Dark-detection spells of their own. They were a two-thirds invisible *machine*.

It was only around four o'clock in the afternoon when Draco's danger senses suddenly prickled. Fred caught it, too. "Malfoy!" he whispered.

Draco had already snapped around. He'd just crossed a small stream, the twins right behind him, and there on the other side of it, where he'd just been, was Blaise Zabini. Draco's breath drew in sharply.

Zabini had his wand in his hand, but it was hanging at his side. Draco's was in his own hand, also at his side. "Hello," he said warily.

"Looking for me?" Zabini asked casually.

Draco's eyebrows lifted. "What makes you ask that?"

"You looked like you needed a decent fuck," Zabini said, with a snicker. "I assumed you'd come to your senses."

Draco smiled pleasantly. "I'm afraid not," he said. He looked at the stream. "I suppose you had that stream there jinxed to alert you to my presence, then."

Zabini just continued smiling, almost blandly.

"So, why are you looking for me, then?" Draco asked, trying to kept his voice calm.

"I wanted to talk," Zabini said. His voice was surprisingly un-nasal for once. Maybe he'd figured out how to talk differently, or something. Maybe Lucius had told him that having a super-nasal voice just wasn't particularly intimidating. He should know - the very thought of his father's smooth, cold voice was still guaranteed to make Draco's blood run chill.

"About what?" Draco countered.

Zabini shrugged. "Lots of stuff," he said. "We were friends for so long, Draco. Can't we just talk for a few moments? Catch up on stuff?"

"I suppose so," Draco said. "Alone, or do you have friends coming along for the 'talk'?"

Zabini looked injured. "Of *course* alone," he said, sounding miffed. A peculiar light came into his eyes then. "Besides - we may not want any company, after a little."

Well, at least he was predictable. "Sure," Draco said. "Come over to this side, then."

"No, you come over here."

"Absolutely not." Draco was utterly calm.

Zabini shrugged again. "Worth a try," he said, with a sudden grin. He stepped easily over the small stream.

"Put your wand on the ground," Draco said.

"Draco - you know I can't do that," Zabini said, giving him a look that clearly said something along the lines of "hello, I'm a Death Eater, you stupid fuck". "Can we sit down?"

"I'd rather stand," Draco said, and didn't move.

"Fine, have it your way. How have you been?" Zabini asked, looking genuinely interested.

"Me? I've been great," Draco said. "You?"

"Oh, great," Zabini said absently. "Only, I really miss you, you know. Crabbe and Goyle just aren't the same. Nott, too."

Draco's stomach clenched. So, all of the male Slytherins from his year were there. "Just like summer camp, I expect," he said tightly.

"Rather, only with more running. I can't really say that I'm a huge fan, you know?" Zabini was very casual, but his eyes kept darting around, flicking to Draco's wand hand and back up to his face again.

"Really. So, what else have you been up to, then?" Draco asked.

Zabini took a long step closer. "Missing you," he said, his voice low. "Gods, Draco - I can't sleep for thinking about you, you know. I swear, you've spoiled me for anyone else. I don't know who your boyfriend is, or if you're still with him, but he's a lucky man."

"I know he is," Draco said, still pleasantly. He wanted very much to back away from Zabini, who was only a few steps away, but knew it would look weak. And he couldn't show weakness. He caught a faint glimmer of someone not-quite-invisible-so-much-as-just-blending-in-with-the-moor moving behind Zabini. Good. The twins had him surrounded. Draco unleashed his inner Slytherin. "But - I don't know," he continued, in a slightly different voice, looking slightly troubled. "Sometimes he's just not quite as rough as I like, you know?"

"Really?" Zabini breathed. Draco glanced as surreptitiously as possible at the other's wand hand, but it hadn't loosened any. Zabini took another step closer. "I know things are different now, politically," Zabini said, an odd expression on his face. "But we could still have a chance, Draco - if you would just think about it - we were good together, weren't we? You know I give great head. Just me do it again, just one more time - and I swear, if you're still not interested, then I'll let this go. I promise. That's all I want, one more chance."

Draco hesitated, considering his options. He lowered his own voice. "Would you really swear to leave me alone after this, if I let you?"

"Yes!" Zabini's eyes raked down Draco's body, and he felt violated by it. "Please, Draco… just - just let me try again!"

He took another step, only two feet away now, and Draco let him. He reached for Zabini's non-wand hand and brought it up to his own cheek. "Did my father put you up to this, or was this your own idea?" he murmured, caressing his own face with Zabini's hand.

"My own idea." Zabini's voice was like velvet, all soft and wanting. "But your father - "

"Is not my father any more," Draco whispered, and nudged his knee between Zabini's legs. The other was hard, oh my, but he was. And, to be fair, Draco's cock was not exactly *entirely* uninterested in the proceedings, either. Fortunately, he was still the proud possessor of a brain, and not just a cock, however. Draco, in a play of being affectionate, slid his hands over Zabini's cheeks and onto his ears, as though on their way into the other's dark, overly-styled hair, but stopped at the ears. Draco rubbed his knee against Zabini's erection again and murmured, "Fred? A P.T. would do the trick about now."

"Done," Fred's voice returned. "Take a step away!"

Draco released Zabini's head, gave him a sweet smile and stepped back.

"Draco, what - " Zabini's voice was confused, still heavy with unsated lust -

"*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Draco couldn't tell whether it was Fred's voice or George's, but the jet of red light came out of nowhere and struck Zabini in the back. He fell forward, and would have fallen onto Draco, but Draco caught him. Lowering the Death Eater to the ground, he said, "Thanks! Good work!"

Zabini's eyes were wide-open in shock and fury. "I'm not sorry, you prick," Draco told him rudely, and aimed his wand at the other's chest. "*Stupefy!*"

Once Stunned, George removed the freezing curse. "Let's get back," he said. "Harry was going to try covering for us, say we were sick or something, but since we don't know what he's said or if they knew we were gone - we'd best make ourselves scarce on arrival."

"Good point. Here." Draco pulled out the invisibility cloak and made it full size again. "You'll want this, then."

"Definitely." The twins faded back into sight, taking off the Disillusionments. "Thanks."

Draco levitated Zabini's body and held the limp wrist firmly. "Let's go."

They Disapparated.

A/N: Feedback is lovely! Apologies for the delay on this one! :)

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Chapter: 22

Chapter 22: Tea with Zabini

There was no one on site upon their arrival. The staff tent was empty. Draco wasn't sure what to do. "Are you guys still here?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah, right here," George's voice said, and his head appeared. "Think we can come out?"

"Probably not," Draco said, frowning. He looked at Zabini and quickly let go of his wrist. A flick of his wand got the jerk settled into a fairly heavy binding.

"Malfoy," Fred said, stepping out of the cloak. His voice was quiet and rather serious-sounding, for once.

Draco looked at him. "Yeah?"

Fred - was he almost hesitating? - cut his eyes down to Draco's waist, or thereabouts, and said in that same, quiet tone - "You're, uh - you've still got - "

Draco felt his face heat about twenty degrees as he realized what Fred was talking about, and was so embarrassed, he could hardly speak. It was true. He still had a hard-on.

George cleared his throat after a second. "It's okay," he said. "It would've happened to anyone."

"Don't tell Harry," Draco mumbled, staring at the dried grass.

"No problem," Fred assured him. "It's fine. Just thought you'd like to know, is all. Say, before you see Harry."

"I don't - I just - *fuck*." Draco couldn't justify it that easily, even if they could. He didn't *want* Zabini. Honestly. He didn't. What he wanted was to off-load Zabini before he woke up again, and go and find Harry.

The twins glanced at each other. "Don't worry about it," George said, trying to placate. "It's just the way these things go. You know it doesn't mean anything."

"I know. It's just... embarrassing, is all," Draco said, trying to smile and failing. Talking about it wasn't helping, either.

"Why don't I go and find Snape or somebody, and tell him you're back and that I ran into you?" Fred suggested. "George can stay here and help guard, in case he wakes up." He nodded toward Zabini's still form. "Sound okay?"

"Sure," Draco said. Fred trotted off, and George slipped back under the invisibility cloak. Draco concentrated on making himself relax. There. It was working.

"Just for the record," George's voice came, "I love this thing. Way too much, in fact. Harry would never sell it, though."

"Yeah, I know," Draco said. "I'd actually forgotten he had it."

"We didn't," George said promptly. "We've been envying him this cloak for *years*. Oh, there they come."

Fred was returning at a fair clip, with both Snape and Dumbledore, who were moving very quickly. Dumbledore. That was enough to wilt any unwanted erection. "You'd better take off, once they get here," Draco said, a note of warning in his voice.

"Definitely," George agreed. "I'll slip off with Fred. We'll leave the cloak in your tent, how's that?"

"Fine," Draco said, his eyes on Snape.

The questions started at once. Dumbledore was far too congratulatory and twinkly for Draco's liking; he was still incredibly pissed off at the man. Snape *enervated* Zabini and forced a sample of Veritaserum into his mouth before the other could even react to being awake. "Quiet," Snape warned. "Not a word."

With Snape's and Dumbledore's wands pointed at his heart, Zabini could only nod, terrified, but his eyes found Draco at once, and were both accusing and very hurt.

"Where did you find him?" Dumbledore asked Draco.

"Near where you said," Draco said. He looked at Snape. "Not far off the larger ridge you'd marked on the map. W - I crossed a stream, and it must have had some sort of jinx on it, because he Apparated in right after that."

Snape looked at Zabini. "Is this true?" he demanded, his voice a little rougher than usual.

Zabini glared at Draco. "Yes."

"You put a *Alertus* Jinx on the stream?"

"Yes."

Back to Draco. "You Stunned him?"

Draco hesitated. What if they verified it with Zabini? He wondered if George was still there, invisible. "Yes."

Dumbledore looked at Draco, long and hard, then asked Zabini, slowly and deliberately, "Draco Stunned you?"

Zabini's glare increased in intensity. "No. It came from behind me," he said. His voice had resumed its normal, nasal timbre, and the very sound of it infuriated Draco beyond words.

There was a long pause. Dumbledore glanced at Snape, who seemed to be trying very hard not to look either of them in the eye. "Behind you?" Dumbledore repeated, quietly.

"Yeah."

"Was Draco alone?"

"I thought he was."

Dumbledore looked up at Draco, and he nearly felt his heart stop beating. There was more power in the old face than he'd realized, and he also realized that he'd never been subjected to the full intensity of Dumbledore's stare before. "Mr. Malfoy," he said, his voice very calm, "is this true?"

Draco's heart was in his throat. What was he supposed to say? He looked at Snape, but Snape just gazed back, expression impenetrable.

"No." The voice came from behind him, and Draco was startled. He knew that voice.

Harry pulled the invisibility cloak off, while Snape and Dumbledore looked on in amazement. "Harry," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "This is a private conversation. I will have to ask you to return later. We will be finished with Mr. Malfoy presently."

"No," Harry said firmly. "You can't do that to him. He wasn't alone, but it's not his fault. He had nothing to do with it."

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak, but Snape cut him off. "Explain," he said to Harry, eyes hard.

Harry jutted out his chin. "The Weasley twins went with him," he said. "They didn't think he should go alone, and he shouldn't have. They just went as back-up, with Disillusionment charms on themselves. It still worked. Draco still got Zabini back here. And he didn't know they were going; they just Apparated there with him. So you can't blame him for it."

He fell silent, almost out of breath, and Dumbledore looked at Snape again. He seemed furious, actually. There was another moment of awkward silence. Draco, not even caring that Zabini was still staring at him intently, took a step backward, found Harry's hand and nearly crushed it in his grip. He let go right away. "I don't want anyone punishing the twins, either," Draco said. "They didn't get in the way or anything, and they were really helpful. It was actually Fred who noticed that Zabini was there, behind me. I don't know what might have happened if they hadn't been there - and I, unlike other parties present, actually *care* whether or not I make it through these little trips."

"Malfoy." Snape's eyes were still hard, and bore into him. "That is un-called-for."

Draco just gave him a dirty look and turned his glare back to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore picked up the vial of Veritaserum. "Drink, please," he said, handing it to Draco. Draco took it and looked at it. "One drop will do," Dumbledore added, his voice soft. He looked down at Zabini. "We will deal with you later," he said, and Stunned Zabini again.

Draco uncorked the potion and sniffed it, though he knew it was odourless. "Why?"

"Because I wish it," Dumbledore said, still pleasantly. "I think it will resolve a few things nicely."

Draco shrugged and sipped. Fine. There, he could feel it - like little fingers probing at his brain. Oh, not pleasant. Not at all.

An even gaze. "Did you know that the Weasley twins were going to accompany you?" Dumbledore asked calmly.

Draco struggled. "N - yes. But I only found out that morning."

"Did you plan it?"

"No. They did."

"Who else knew about the plan?"

"Harry." *Fuck!* He had *not* meant to say that!

"Ah." Dumbledore glanced at Snape again, but Snape did not meet his eyes. "So, one of the twins Stunned Zabini?"

"Yes." It was so easy, just to let the potion answer for him. Draco fought it nonetheless. If only Dumbledore would keep asking easy questions...

"What were you doing at the time?"

"Headmaster," Snape broke in, sounding angry, "the outcome of this mission was to cross-examine Zabini, not interrogate Malfoy, if I recall correctly. You know what you need to know."

Dumbledore inclined his head politely. "Very well," he said. He looked back at Draco. "But I trust your efforts were met with success."

Draco's lips were stiff. "Obviously," he said, hardly moving them.

"Excellent." Dumbledore consulted a pocket watch. "It is nearly time for dinner. Why don't you return to your tent and get unpacked?"

"Gladly." Good, it was starting to wear off. The mental pressure had definitely lessened some. Thank the gods for Snape.

"Severus," Dumbledore said then, "please call Kingsley and Alastor. They will want to be a part of the... questioning.'

"Certainly," Snape said. He turned and marched off without a backward glance; Draco turned his back on Dumbledore, as well.

Harry had the cloak slung over his arm. "Come on," Draco said quietly. Harry nodded, and they walked away. Once out of earshot, though, Harry said flatly, "George told me what you were supposed to do."

Draco was outraged at this, that Harry knew and hadn't told him, but fought to keep it down. "Did he," he said, as neutrally as possible.

"Yeah. So - did you do it?" Harry was very blunt.

Draco realized, with a feeling like the bottom of his stomach dropping away, that if he *had*, or if he gave Harry any reason to believe that he had, he could seriously lose Harry. And still could, if Harry didn't like what *had* happened. His furious defense of Draco was fine for public eyes, but privately - that was a different matter. "Harry," he said carefully, "what exactly are you asking me?"

Harry stopped walking very abruptly. "I thought it was pretty clear," he said harshly. "I'm asking if you seduced him."

"Well, the answer is no," Draco said, a little louder than he'd meant to. "No, of course not! Yes, Dumbledore wanted me to. He seems to have thought it was the only way I could have gotten to him. But I didn't. It's his own fault that he's so - I don't know - obsessed with me, I guess, that got him here, but I can't really take credit for that."

"Did you touch him at all?" Harry was relentless, yet at the same time, his face looked rather young, and, beneath the surface anger, almost fearful.

Draco swallowed. "I was only leading him on, Harry. Yes, I touched his face, so that I could cover his ears to ask Fred to hit him with the bodybinding curse, okay?"

Harry wavered, and Draco got angry. "How can you doubt me like that? We've *talked* about this! I'm not remotely interested in Zabini, I never have been, and I never will be! It's not like I walk up to random men and tell them that I love them, you know!"

There. Harry cracked. A tiny tugging showed at the corner of his mouth. "Can you still feel the Veritaserum?" he asked.

Draco paused. "Yes."

"*Do* you love me?" Harry asked, just a touch of wistfulness creeping into his voice.

Now Draco relaxed. Finally. "Yes, you stupid git," he said roughly, and pulled Harry into his arms. There, that felt right. "How can you not know that?"

Harry dropped the cloak and put his arms around Draco. He was quiet for a bit. Then, his face buried in Draco's shoulder, he said, "It's just that it feels like everyone just thinks of us as kids. Like it doesn't *matter* if you fuck Zabini, or whatever, if it gets him captured. They wouldn't make - oh, I don't know, the *Weasleys* do that. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, I mean. I just feel like they don't have any respect at all, for either of us."

Draco pushed him back, gently. "They don't," he said bluntly. "Snape does. I think. But we're just tools to the rest of them. You're their little hero tool, who they're going to use until Voldemort's gone. And then they'll probably forget about you. And I'm just a soldier who happens to owe the general something of a rather large debt. Not to mention an oath."

Harry scowled and kicked at the ground. "I *want* to be forgotten about," he said. "I want to be left alone. And I'll be damned if they're going to just use *you* like that. I mean, they even *know* that you're not just some average soldier. You're Draco-fucking-Malfoy, for gods' sake!"

Draco smiled wryly. "And that's a good thing?"

Harry paused. A reluctant smile crossed his features. "Yeah," he said. "Don't give me that. You know you're a better wizard than most."

"Sure I do, but it's nice to hear, coming from the Boy Who Lived," Draco said jauntily, jumping back before Harry could hit him.

"Don't call me that!"

"Boy Who Li-ived, Boy Who Li-ived," Draco sang, and ran away. Harry, cackling madly, ran after him and tackled him from behind. They both fell down, laughing and kicking. It all turned around in less than a second, and soon enough they were kissing and moaning, and somehow Harry had wound up on top of him…

A discreet cough caught Draco's attention, and he opened his eyes to the sight of an upside-down Ron Weasley. He groaned. "Gods, it's the Weasel," he commented aloud, to nobody in particular.

"Hello, Malfoy," Weasley said dryly. "I see you're back already."

Draco hesitated. "No, that's Harry's back, actually," he said, and sputtered into giggles. It was true; he'd pulled Harry's shirt up, only partly by accident, and both his hands were on Harry's bare back, which was surely visible to sight. Harry, who was, despite Weasley's presence, still creating what felt like a very large hickey somewhere around his collarbone.

Harry burst out laughing, too, and couldn't seem to stop, although he did reach around in a feeble attempt to pull his shirt down again. "Hi Ron," he said, to Draco's chest.

"Hi, Harry," Weasley said, sounding more amused than anything else now. "Are you drunk?"

"No." Harry only laughed harder, which didn't help Draco's giggles any. "I'm just - ha ha, I'm just saying hello to Draco."

"Well, you're uh - doing that in the middle of Field One, you know," Weasley said. He looked around. "Well, perhaps not the *very* middle, but still quite in open view. People are starting to go to dinner. I - " Weasley's voice went even drier - "don't know if you're, uh, hungry, but - that's what's on the agenda for right about now."

Draco managed to stop laughing. "Thanks, Weasley," he said.

Weasley shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Yeah, no problem," he said awkwardly. "Well, uh - there are my brothers - oh, except it looks like they're headed for the staff tent. Must be in trouble, then. I expect someone will tell me all about this at some point - fully dressed and not lying on the ground, that is. Anyway, I'm going to dinner. See you later."

Harry rolled off Draco and looked around, somewhat concerned. There *were* a few people starting to drift across the Field toward the lodge, so he stood up quickly, brushing bits of dead grass off his clothes before going back to retrieve the invisibility cloak. Draco followed suit. "Well, *that* killed the mood," he said loudly.

Harry took one look at him and started to laugh again. "I can't go in there now! I'm embarrassed!"

"Serves you right," Draco told him smugly. "You're the one who tackled me, git."

Harry looked around. "Trees," he commanded.

He was all set to jog off, but Draco caught his wrist. "No. Wait. Let's wait until later, and make it really good," he proposed. Harry wavered. "I'm hungry," Draco added, petulantly. "I've been traversing the Scottish moors all day, looking for someone who wants to rip my pants off and eat them, and then I come home to a jealous, violent boyfriend and a nasty, manipulative old man - I say I deserve supper."

Harry narrowed his eyes, though the corners of his mouth were twitching again. "All that way, when you had someone who wants to rip your pants off right here all along," he mused.

"And eat them?" Draco prompted, reminding him.

Harry looked at Draco's jeans and wrinkled his nose. "No, those are probably *dirty*," he said.

Draco shoved him and started walking toward the lodge, knowing Harry would follow. "You love me dirty," he said, his voice low, quirking an eyebrow up at his lover.

Who moaned. "Don't I know it," Harry admitted. "Hey. What are they going to do with Blaise, do you think?"

Draco shrugged. "No idea, really," he said. "I expect they won't tell us. You know how they are."

"True." Harry glanced at him. "You're not feeling bad about it, are you? Bringing him in, I mean?"

"Why would I be feeling bad?"

"Well - you know, you went to school with him for all that time, in the same dorm and everything, and even if you found him annoying, you still - "

"If you're about to remind me that I let him give me blow jobs one more time, I'm going to hurt you," Draco cut in, warningly.

Harry closed his mouth. "Just asking," he said defensively.

They were at the lodge doors. Draco looked around. For the time being, at least, they were clear. Oh. He had a better idea, and took the cloak out of Harry's arms, swirling it quickly around them both. "We have time for a bit of a snog, first," he announced.

He heard Harry's breath draw in. "Do we," he murmured.

"Mmm-hmm." Draco found him, under the cloak, and brought their mouths together for a *proper* welcome-home kiss. Oh, definitely better. Harry's tongue always felt like silk, warm and smooth, with just the right amount of pressure. Perfect. Draco held him tightly and let their limbs melt together.

"You know we can hear that, right?" an amused voice cut in. "It doesn't make you *inaudible*, you know - we should know!"

Draco drew back. "Note to self," he said, quite loudly enough for the twins to hear, "kill Weasley twins in sleep."

A hand reached out and grabbed the cloak, exposing them - and, as it happened, both their erections. Lovely. Draco made a grab for the cloak and snatched it back. "Bugger off," he growled.

The look on their faces was identical: pure glee. "Not on your life," George said firmly. "Come on, we've got lots to talk about."

"And you two clearly need to keep your - energy - up, for what I know's coming tonight," Fred said, with a deliberately provoking look toward their midsections.

Harry turned predictably red, but said, "Shut up, you wanker! And stop looking at my crotch!"

The twins just laughed. "Coming in?" George asked, opening the door.

They looked at each other. "Yeah," Draco said.

"At least you're cooler than Ron was about it," Harry grumbled, following the three of them.

"Ron caught you there, too?" George sounded trebly amused now. "And he didn't die of a heart attack?"

"No, he didn't catch us *there*," Draco said irritably. "He caught us back there, on the field. And he was actually surprisingly cool about it, considering."

"What, that he's a wanker?" Fred asked. "Oh, speak of the devil." He flashed his brother and Granger a charming grin, and they all sat down.

* * *

"I simply cannot believe that!" Granger said, sounding absolutely outraged. "They can't put you on *probation*! You might have saved Draco's *life*!"

Harry looked as outraged as Draco was. The twins were shrugging and looking philosophical. "It's alright, Hermione," Fred said. "We're not really all that surprised, to be honest. It could be worse - we could have been sent to keep house at Headquarters or something, which we were half-expecting."

"But - you guys should be treated like heroes, not like disobedient schoolchildren!" Granger insisted.

"Possibly," George said, pulling apart a fourth bun and buttering it. "But we never have been before, so why start now? We've always had our own way of doing things, and they're not usually ways that the powers and principalities approve of, so much."

"I still remember your swamp," Harry said, with a definite hint of admiration. "That was sweet." He elbowed Draco hard. "Of course, that was back before *some* of us had seen the light, with regards to Umbridge."

"We are *not* discussing Umbridge again," Draco said firmly. He noticed the Weasel casting Granger a dark look, but he (mercifully) said nothing.

"So anyway," Fred continued, "all it means, really, is that we're supposed to be in bed by eleven every night, plus we have to help Snape prepare Potions Review stuff, and we're not allowed to play Quidditch any more."

"But that's so *stupid*!" Harry burst out, angry again. "I just - *why*?! Why can't just they let it go?"

"Because they don't like anyone challenging their authority," Draco said quietly.

Granger caught his eye. "That's *exactly* it," she said, as emphatically as only Granger could be. "You guys shouldn't stand for it at all." This was directed at the twins.

George leaned over. "Well, what do you want us to do, Hermione? Go on strike?"

Before she could answer, Weasley, Jr., butted in. "If you guys go on strike, then Harry and Malfoy should be striking, too."

Draco looked at Weasley in open surprise. Was the Weasel actually standing *up* for him? The other caught his eye and turned a brick-red colour. "Just saying," he muttered. "You and Harry seem to be getting a pretty raw deal, too. Both of you."

Draco was almost speechless. "Thanks, Weasley," he said, after a moment. Harry squeezed his hand under the table, just quickly.

An owl arrived at the table then, landing in front of Draco. It was a barn owl, large and imperious-looking. "Mail for supper?" Draco asked it, with a frown. "That can't be good." He took the scroll and the owl flew off at once. Clearly, no reply was expected.

"What's it say, Draco?" Granger asked, her voice almost hushed with dread.

Draco unscrolled it and scanned it. Harry leaned against him, reading over his shoulder. After one read, he glanced at Harry and caught his lover's grim, set expression. Great. That again, too. He cleared his throat and read aloud, quietly.

"Mr. Malfoy,

Your assistance is requested in the case of
the interrogation of prisoner-of-war Blaise Zabini.
Please join the team in the tent behind the staff

tent at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore.

"Your assistance?" Weasley repeated, eyebrows at his hairline. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Draco glanced at Harry again. "That's what I'd like to know, too," his lover said darkly, and looked at him.

"I don't know," Draco said, but had a sinking feeling that he did. "Want to come with me?"

"If I go, I'll make a scene," Harry warned.

"I don't care."

"Okay, fine, I'll come." Harry's mood was instantly stormy, and everyone around him seemed to be leaning away slightly.

Fred caught Draco's eye and nodded toward Harry, eyebrows raised. Draco guessed that he was trying to ask if that was really wise. Draco just gave him a nod and got up. "I'm finished, are you?" he asked.

"Oh, sure," Harry said, and pushed back from the table. "See you all later."

"Good luck," George said.

* * *

They marched up to the staff tent, Harry getting progressively angrier and angrier as they went. "So," Draco said. "How did the whole thing with me and Zabini come up between you and

George, anyway?"

"What? Oh, that," Harry said, remembering. "Well. He kind of warned me. Just in case I found out about it somehow. That you'd been told to do that, I mean. I ran into him - I think he was coming to find me, anyway, and I wanted to know what they were going to do to you, so I took the cloak back and sneaked back to where you were. He didn't say anything about what actually happened; he just told me that you'd been told to."

"I see," Draco said. There was a pause, not quite painful, but almost, as they both thought the same thoughts. "I don't know if this will be anything like that," Draco said. "But it might be."

"You aren't going to - would you do it?" Harry asked, managing to look unhappy, angry and fearful all at once.

Draco let his fingers brush against Harry's. "No. And if anything *was* going to happen, I'd make sure you were there for it. Would that make you feel any better?"

Harry thought about it. "Maybe."

Well, it was better than nothing. They were there. Snape was sitting outside, waiting for them. Draco walked up, Harry just behind him. "What's all this about?" Draco asked, without preamble, thrusting the parchment out at Snape.

Snape took it and scanned it. His eyebrows went up considerably. "I do not know," he responded, and handed it back. "I will fetch Dumbledore and you can ask him yourself."

Dumbledore appeared, solo, a minute later. "Mr. Malfoy," he said. "Thank you for coming." His eyes wandered to Harry.

"Harry stays," Draco said, an edge of steel to his voice. "I won't do anything that he can't be here for."

Dumbledore looked very much like he might like to say something very angry at this point, but didn't. "Very well," he said. "I would merely like you to try getting some information out of Zabini. We were hoping that you could persuade him."

"Veritaserum?" Draco asked, disbelievingly. He couldn't believe that Zabini had actually managed to resist *that*, the stupid wanker.

"He has done something - or had something done to him - which prevents him from answering," Dumbledore said, with a sigh. "Snape is currently attempting to ascertain what that might be, whether potion-induced of spell-induced. In the mean time - I thought there would be nothing to lose in trying your influence. He *does* quite like you, after all. He has been asking to see you, repeatedly."

"Yeah, I'll bet he wants to see me repeatedly," Draco muttered, loud enough to be heard. "Fine. I'll ask. I'll do my best to be persuasive. But that's *it*."

Dumbledore glanced at Harry. "Perhaps it would be better not to… hinder his progress," he said cautiously.

Harry crossed his arms. "I'm going with him," he said, in his very most stubborn voice.

Dumbledore shook his head slightly. "If you trust him," he said quietly, "let him go alone."

Harry stopped, his comment frozen on his lips. A look of painful indecision came over him. "That's not fair," he said, very softly.

"No, it isn't," Draco said, much louder, and glaring at Dumbledore. "I *asked* Harry to come. He does trust me. I know that. Don't you go putting stuff like that on us, when it's not even an issue."

Dumbledore's lips tightened. "In light of the fact that this is an interrogation," he said pointedly, "I really feel that it should not be treated as a spectator sport. I have done much in allowing Harry in this tent in the first place, given he was not invited. This is my final word. Only Draco will go."

Oh, so now I'm "Draco" again, am I? Draco looked at Harry. "I'm not going to do anything you wouldn't like," he said, and willed Harry to believe him.

Harry nodded quickly and looked away, evidently still furious. With Dumbledore, hopefully, not him, though. Draco took a deep breath. "Okay, where is he?"

Dumbledore pointed. "In there. I need to know where the other Death Eaters are, particularly your father, and also where Voldemort is. I want to know why he was sent to look for you. I can tell that he knows many of the answers to these questions, if not all, but I cannot convince him to speak. Before we try more… painful methods, I thought I would try this. I *am* trying to be a decent man, you know."

Spare me. "Right," Draco said, and went into the next chamber. The sealing feeling over his ears told him that he'd entered a sound-proofed place - sounds from either side would not penetrate. Zabini was in a cage, basically. It was a makeshift prison cell, but all four walls were bars. Zabini himself was lying on a small cot, his back to the door. Draco walked up to the bars and studied his former dormmate for a moment before he spoke. "Hey."

Zabini didn't move a muscle. "Fuck off."

"Did you know I was here?"

"Course I did."

"Thought you wanted to see me."

There was a long, intense silence. "I did," Zabini finally said.

"Well, I'm here now," Draco said. He looked around. There was a small, three-legged stool in the corner and he dragged it forward to sit down. "So."

"So what?"

"What did you want to see me for?"

"Fuck off, Malfoy. You know what I want, and you know you're not here to give it to me, so just leave me alone."

Draco noticed that Zabini was shivering. "Are you cold?" he asked, in genuine concern. The August day was quite warm, and he wondered if Zabini was ill.

He got no answer, but Zabini made a visible effort, at least from what Draco could see of his back, to stop the shaking. "Look, Blaise," Draco said, the other's given name sounding foreign in his mouth, "if you don't talk to me, they're going to break you. Don't doubt me on that one, okay? They're determined to get information out of you. You're a prisoner-of-war now, you realize. Come on. Talk to me."

Silence. Then, slowly, Zabini rotated slowly on his cot, swinging his legs down and turning to face Draco. Draco was startled, almost alarmed. The other had been crying; his face was swollen and blotchy, smudged where Zabini had rubbed his face with grubby hands. He glared at Draco. "That's *rich*, Malfoy," he spat. "This is the first time in our mutual lives that you've ever come to talk to me when I didn't approach you. Now it's suddenly okay, because I'm a Death Eater and I've got the fucking information your side needs. Fuck you."

"So you *are* a Death Eater, then," Draco said. Somehow, he'd been hoping that Zabini was just in training, still. Only because Draco had known him, if disliked him, for so long. He'd feel the same way if Weasley or Longbottom became Death Eaters, if he could even buy the concept of one of them doing any such thing.

Zabini shoved the sleeve of his left arm up and thrust his bared forearm out at Draco. "It isn't a tattoo," he sneered.

The Dark Mark glared up at Draco with as much or possibly even more menacing force than Zabini himself had been doing. He suppressed the urge to shudder. "Do you know where my father is?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah. He's fucking himself looking at your picture," Zabini said nastily, his lips twisting unpleasantly.

"Look, you wanker," Draco said through gritted teeth, "I am actually trying to save your sorry arse from being tortured, okay? Just fucking talk already!"

"Go to hell."

Time to get Slytherin. His anger was getting him a little too Gryffindor. Draco stood up and walked over to the bars and leaned his hips against them casually, his hands up near his face. "That's not really what you want, is it?" he asked, just a little breathy.

Zabini's expression froze. Then, petulantly - "You're just playing games with me."

"But even games with me are better than nothing," Draco said, letting his voice get husky. "You *like* me provocative like this. You've *dreamed* about it. Haven't you." It was not a question, just a statement, uttered in a provokingly knowing tone of voice.

Zabini stood, unsteadily. "What are you doing?"

"I'm… indulging myself," Draco said vaguely, and changed his stance slightly, as though uncomfortable. Or something else.

Zabini's eyes wandered down and he seemed temporarily incapable of speech. "Uhh…"

"Come here," Draco all but whispered.

Zabini came, obedient to his own desires. "Draco…" There was just a hint of whine there, of yearning desperation.

Draco let him touch his fingers on the bars. "Where is my father?" he whispered.

"Scotland," Zabini whispered back, his eyes on Draco's fingers. "Where he was when you found the meeting."

So you didn't know that Snape was there. Good. "Who sent you to find me?" Still a whisper, and Zabini's fingers were caressing his.

"Your father." Zabini pressed himself against the bars; Draco could *just* feel his erection. Something stirred in the deeps of his belly, and he ignored it.

"Why?"

"I… he wanted me to capture you… torture you for information about Dumbledore. He suspected you were wherever we are now. And you are." Zabini didn't look up, but continued to speak to their fingers.

"And he'll never know, will he?" Draco whispered. "Because you'll never see him again."

Zabini *did* look up then, fear in his wide, hazel eyes. "Are they going to kill me?"

"I don't know," Draco said softly, just above a whisper now. "But I'm certainly going to kill my father."

Zabini's face twisted. "Why?"

"Because… of lots of things," Draco responded vaguely.

Zabini swallowed. "He was… good to me."

"I'm sure he was." Draco was nearly crooning, his voice very smooth and very gentle. "I'm sure he took good care of you. He probably even looks enough like me for you to get off when he fucks you."

Zabini's head snapped back, and he took a step away from the bars. "Fuck you!"

"That's what you want, I know," Draco agreed mournfully. "Come back here."

Looking utterly confused, Zabini returned, looking uncertain.

"Hands," Draco said, looking at his own. Encouraged, Zabini slid his fingers over Draco's again and resumed what he'd been doing. "Where is Voldemort?"

Zabini flinched hard. "I don't know," he said, too fast. "Don't ask me that again."

"Do you really not know?"

"I really don't, Draco." Zabini was pleading now, his eyes trying to catch Draco's, but Draco kept his gaze down.

"Where are the rest of the Death Eaters?"

"I don't fucking *know*! They don't tell us all that!" Zabini sounded desperate. "I can't tell you what I don't know, Draco. Tell them that. Don't let them torture me. Please!" His fingers gripped Draco's; the beds of his nails white.

Draco surveyed the other, at close range. "Don't worry," he said, after a moment. "I'll do my best to convince them. What are you doing to block the Veritaserum?"

Zabini looked away. "I can't tell you."

"Well, I would stop doing it, if I were you," Draco said. He paused. "Another thing."

"*What*, damn it?"

"If you were so interested in convincing me to like you, why were you always such a prick about it?" It was curiosity, nothing more. But it seemed like a good time to ask.

Zabini sighed. "Thought you would like a little force. Being dominated. You know. A little taste of home for you."

Draco shook his head. "No one dominates a Malfoy. Not even other Malfoys." *Not any more, at least.*

"So, your new boyfriend always bottoms for you, then? Fuck, I *asked* you to fuck me!"

"I know you did," Draco said. "And no. He doesn't always bottom."

"Then - "

"You don't know shit about anything," Draco said, and turned to go.

"Wait!" Zabini called, going back to the bars. "Draco!"

Draco stopped at the entrance way. "What?"

Zabini's face was framed in the bars. "Come and visit me sometime. Please."

Draco thought for a moment. "I'll think about it."

He turned again, but again, the other's voice held him back. "Draco."

"What?"

"Thanks."

Draco paused, wondering what to say, then decided not to say anything at all. He turned and walked out.

* * *

And into a blast of noise.

" - NO, I DON'T *LIKE* YOU USING MY LOVER AS A MEANS OF INTERROGATION!" Harry was yelling, in what the twins had assured Draco was true Harry fashion. "HE'S A

PERSON, NOT YOUR OWN, PERSONAL TOY! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF THE WAY YOU TREAT US BOTH!"

Dumbledore was sitting there calmly, absorbing Harry's wrath like a sponge, and Draco almost had the heart to feel sorry for him. Almost. He remembered their impending separation in a little more than two weeks, and hardened his heart again. But Harry. That wouldn't do at all, his lover was all upset. He went over. "Hey. What's going on?" he asked.

Chest still heaving, red in the face, Harry just said (and even then, it sounded like he had to fight to keep himself from yelling), "I'm just having *words* with Dumbledore about things in general."

"Words?" Draco raised his eyebrows. He looked at Dumbledore. "That's a powerful Silencing spell you've got on that chamber," he said. "I didn't hear any of this in there."

"Excellent," Dumbledore said. "Were you successful?"

"I believe so," Draco said cautiously. "I'm not sure how much of it is true, but I *did* tell him that he'd be up for torture if he didn't talk to me. I also suggested that he stop whatever he's doing to block the Veritaserum, so you'll have to see how that goes next time you question him. He says my father is still where the meeting was; Snape knows where that is, that he doesn't know where the rest of the Death Eaters are, that my father sent him after me to get information about you, and probably punish me for defecting as well - " this was his own insertion, but he had no doubt that it was true, whether or not Zabini knew it - and Draco suspected that he did - "and that he doesn't know where Voldemort is, at all."

Dumbledore listened to it all, nodding and nodding. "Good," he said. "Very good, indeed. Thank you for your assistance, Draco. You may both go - if you're finished," he added, with a polite nod to Harry.

"I'm nowhere *near* finished," Harry spat. "But we'll postpone the rest of this."

Another nod, patient. "In that case, good evening."

They left the tent. "So," Draco prompted. "Not good, I guess."

Harry attempted a casual shrug, but his shoulders were still taut with rage. "No. I'm starting to really hate him."

"Are you? I always assumed he was sort of a hero figure to you," Draco said, surprised.

"What? Dumbledore? No," Harry said positively. "Not since Sirius died. My whole fifth year was one big blur of me wondering what the hell was going on, and Dumbledore refusing to tell me anything I actually needed to know. He always said he was doing what he was doing because he cares about me, but if that was still true, he would care a bit more about what *I* want, rather than following the details of his precious war plan to the tee. There'd be nothing *wrong* with us working together, and he fucking knows it!"

His voice had risen again by the end. There was a patch of Hufflepuffs crossing the field, or Draco would have touched him, then. "Hey. Calm down," he said instead. "Let's wait until we're somewhere by ourselves. And then let's not talk about it at all. I want to go and have you make passionate love to me until dawn."

Harry shivered, and smiled reluctantly. "That does sound a bit of a better plan," he admitted.

"That's what I like to hear." Draco nudged his shoulder into Harry's, and Harry leaned back. They were crossing the area in front of the tents now, and as it was still quite light out, they both looked around before Draco knelt to unzip his tent.

He didn't know how Hedwig had gotten in there, but he was glad to see her. "Hello, you," he said affectionately.

She flew toward him, hooting happily, and landed on his arm. "Harry? What's she doing here?"

Harry looked guilty. "Oh. Well, I think she missed you. So I thought maybe she could visit you before she goes hunting tonight."

Draco laughed. "How thoughtful." He ran his palm over Hedwig's smooth, white head and she closed her eyes in contentment, hooting under her breath. "How are things in Owl Land?"

She opened one eye and gave him a baleful glare, as though to reproach him for asking such a

stupid question. "Oh, pardon *me*", Draco said, rolling his eyes. Harry crouched behind him, his hands on Draco's shoulders. And he was naked. Very much so. He pressed his hips forward, sliding his erection along Draco's denim-covered arse.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked provocatively, but Draco could hear the smile in his voice.

"No, I have absolutely no idea," he said casually, only his voice was a little too breathy. "Is it… your wand?"

Harry burst out laughing. Then, in a stupid-sounding voice, he said, apparently trying to sound like a sleazy porn star, "Yeah, baby, it's mah *magick* wand."

Hedwig gave a loud and clearly disapproving hoot. Draco looked at her. "I know, that was terrible," he agreed. "You shouldn't have to stay here to listen to this kind of shite. Do you want to go?"

She hooted again and flapped her wings, so Draco turned around. "Out of my road, Mr. Magick Wand," he said, giving Harry a playful shove - which sent the other teetering, balanced in his crouched position.

"Hey!"

Draco ignored him, and let Hedwig out. Turning back, he said, "You got a head start. No fair."

"Hurry up," Harry commanded. "I'm dying of lust here."

"That's sweet, you missed me," Draco cooed at him.

"Damn right! Get your clothes off!" Harry grinned.

Draco had no problem with this whatsoever. He loved it when Harry got playful and just a bit rough, actually. He shed his clothing in seconds, and Harry pounced. "Silencing - spell!" Draco just managed to gasp out before Harry's mouth took over his and his hands went wild.

And it *still* pissed him off that Harry could summon his wand wandlessly, when he couldn't. "*Silencio!*" Harry tossed it into a corner of the tent in what seemed a dangerously cavalier gesture, but then he was on his knees, his mouth stretched around the majority of Draco's cock a second later, and all rational thoughts fled.

It was looking to be a very good night. Later, after Draco had come, feeling like it was his first blow job all over again, he'd wrestled Harry down to his bed and impaled himself on his lover's cock. Harry moaned and writhed beneath him, thrusting up, his fingers sometimes in Draco's hair, pulling, sometimes on his hips, driving even deeper into him, and then, by the end, on Draco's cock, hand twisting, slippery with lube and saliva. Draco's back arched and he came with a keening noise, grateful for the Silencing spell once again. Harry rolled them over and increased his already-furious pace frantically, hips thrusting and jerking until he was coming too, and Draco felt like he was dissolving from the inside out as Harry's come filled him.

It ended in sloppy kisses, which turned into bites and licks and hickeys that would have to be Vanished later, and all manner of nonsense. And if he didn't think about anything beyond this actual moment, or the ones to follow - say in about ten minutes, Draco figured - then he was absolutely, fantastically happy.

Harry giggled beneath him. "You'll never guess what I'm going to do *now*," he said, and Draco was pleased to discover that, no, he couldn't guess.

It was a *very* good night, indeed.

A/N: Leave me a line, if you would. :) Happy!authors = productive!authors! :)

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Chapter: 23

Chapter 23: Zabini's Revelation

"I was thinking of going to visit Zabini," Draco said abruptly.

Harry looked up over his lunch. "Yeah? Why?"

Draco shrugged, trying to put his finger on it. "I don't know. See if he'll maybe talk more," he said. "I also just want to ask him stuff, like why he's a Death Eater and stuff. You can come if you want, as long as you stay invisible."

Harry considered. "When were you going to go?"

"After supper," Draco said.

Harry made a face. "What better way to spend a Friday evening?" he sighed. "Do you really want me to come? I trust you, you know."

Something occurred to Draco, and he smiled. "Yeah, come," he urged. "I have an idea. Disillusion yourself, and come. Are you up for a little prisoner torment?"

Harry began to smile. "Are you going to tease him?"

"Sure," Draco said. "If you're okay with it."

"If it's happening right in front of me and not behind my back, I think I'd be okay with it," Harry decided.

The twins arrived then, and sat down. "Hello, all," Fred said, reaching across Harry for the platter of sandwiches. "What's going on?"

"Not much," Harry said, "except that your arm is right in my face. Where've you two been?"

"Oh, you know," George said lightly. "Just bowing and scraping and promising to be good. And conniving."

"As usual," Fred adding, grinning at his twin.

George grinned back. "As usual," he echoed.

"Conniving with regards to what?" Draco asked.

"None of your business," Fred said promptly. "At least, not yet. Just wait."

Draco looked at George, but he concurred. "We'll tell you if it works out," he said.

"Fine, keep us in suspense, then," Harry said.

Fred threw a bit of beef at him. "We will. Don't worry your little head about that."

"Prat."

* * *

Draco got past Moody's apprentice, stationed at the door of the prison tent, with a more or less invisible Harry right on his heels.

Zabini was wanking. That much was obvious. Lying on his back on the cot, his cock sticking up out of his jeans, his hand fisting furiously. Draco cleared his throat. Zabini looked up. His hand stilled, but he made no attempt to hide what he'd been doing. "Well, well," he said, breathing hard, "looks like dreams *do* come true."

"Shut the fuck up," Draco said harshly. "I'm not here to fulfill any of those dreams. I want to talk to you."

Zabini gave him a careless wave. "Talk away," he said, and resumed what he'd been doing.

Draco sighed. "Could you stop that? Look at me."

Zabini pushed himself up on his elbows and grinned through hazy eyes. "That might be enough right there. Is there any way I could bribe you into taking off your clothes?"

Draco gritted his teeth. He felt Harry touch his hand, though, and wondered if it was a reminder that he was there to get more information out of Zabini, or a warning. "Let's try acting like adults to start with, shall we?"

"Adults have sex," Zabini pointed out.

"True. Adults also know when and where," Draco snapped. "I just want to talk to you, alright?"

Zabini sighed and pulled his shirt down over his obviously still full-blown erection. "So, talk," he said.

Draco found that same, three-legged stool from the day before and sat down. "How are you?" he asked. "Apart from horny, that is."

Another smile, sardonic this time. "Well, you pretty much said it," Zabini replied lazily.

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "Horny? That's it? I was thinking along the lines of, are they feeding you enough, are you upset about being here - you know what I mean? You're a fucking prisoner-of-war, and all you can think about is sex?"

Zabini attempted to cross his legs at the knee, but grimaced and changed his mind. "That's just the point. I don't think you realize how much I think about you."

"You're completely and totally obsessed, you know," Draco said flatly.

A shrug. "Maybe," the other said vaguely. "So, since you're obviously not going to oblige, talk and let me finish my wank in peace."

The crudeness of it all almost hurt Draco, it was so offensive. He covered his face with one hand. "Let's try this again," he said, voice partially muffled behind his hand. "Are you okay?"

Zabini paused. "I'm fine," he said stiffly, looking away. "I'm never getting out of here, am I?"

"Probably not," Draco said. "The war, and all." He waited a second. "Why'd you become a Death Eater?"

Zabini snorted. "Why not? It seemed like the thing to do."

"Do you believe in all that crap?"

"Sure," Zabini said easily. "Don't you? I know your father does."

"If I believed it, why would I be here?" Draco asked heavily. "No, I don't believe in any of it. Obviously."

Zabini looked up then. "Your father's going to kill you, you know," he said quietly. "I mean that. I know you said you're going to try getting to him first - let me tell you that you'd better try *hard*, Draco - he's really pissed off. And he'll probably kill me, too, just for getting captured by you. That's how much he wants to find you."

"Good to know," Draco said, his throat tight. "I'll be sticking close with my people here. Don't worry. Thanks for the warning, though."

Zabini looked at him. "Who're you fucking, Draco? Tell me. I drive myself crazy, thinking about it all the time."

Draco wondered, again, what Harry was thinking at the moment. "I'm not going to tell you that," he said quietly. "I will tell you that it's not just a random fuck buddy. I'm actually - I don't know if you'll believe this, but I'm actually in love with him."

Zabini snorted. "You're not capable of love."

"Fuck you. I am so."

The other looked him straight in the eye. "No, you're not. You're the coldest person I've ever met. You don't even have a heart."

Draco stood. "I am not cold," he said, though his voice belied it.

Zabini shivered. "I'll take it back if you come over here," he said.

Draco glanced over his shoulder, trying to gauge where Harry was. He couldn't tell, but surely Harry would prevent him, if he didn't want it. Besides, Draco had an idea. He moved forward, over to the bars. "Take it back."

Zabini got up and came over, his cock still half-hard. He reached for Draco's crotch, but Draco pulled his hips back. "You know more than what you told me yesterday, don't you?"

"Come here, and I'll tell you."

Draco felt Harry behind him, listened as his lover leaned forward and whispered, "Go along with it."

Draco stepped forward again. "Tell me."

Zabini was too close; his breath hot against Draco's face. "I know a lot." He knocked his hips into Draco's crotch. "You bastard, you're not even hard." His hand shot out, determined to remedy that, and began massaging through the denim over Draco's cock.

Harry didn't do anything. "If you're going to do this, at least fucking do it properly," Draco ground out.

Zabini nodded and shoved his hips against Draco's against. Draco shoved him away. "I don't want your come all over my jeans," he snarled. "You want this, work."

Harry was behind him again, hands on his arse. "Make him suck you," he whispered. "I want to see that."

Odd, how even jealousy could become a kink, Draco reflected momentarily.

"Can I suck you?" Zabini asked, a hopeful light glinting in his hazel eyes, sparkling in the torchlight.

Draco pretended to consider it. "Only if you do a good job," he said disdainfully.

"I will. Promise. You know I'm good at this, Draco. Please." Zabini's cock grew again as he spoke, the lust burning in his eyes.

Draco unbuttoned his jeans, feeling Harry's hands over his, fumbling against his fingers as he unzipped, and he got it. It was like they were going to fuck Zabini together. Take advantage of him. Oh, how very twisted. Draco liked it. Harry slid the jeans down Draco's hips, exposing his thighs and arse to the firelight. "Get to work."

"Gods, Draco, you're so beautiful," Zabini whimpered, and sank to his knees. Draco pressed himself forward, his crotch framed by two of the bars, and Zabini started to suck right away, urging Draco's cock to life.

It was good, but almost more startling was the fact that Harry had slid down behind him and was urging his thighs further apart, kneeling… Draco had a sudden flash of what his lover was about to do before it happened, and *that* thought made nearly all the blood in his body rush into his cock, filling it to complete hardness. It didn't matter; let Zabini think he was just reacting to the sucking. He and Harry knew better. Harry's tongue stabbed upward, directly into his hole, without warning. Draco keened; his hips jerking forward into Zabini's hot mouth. Harry's hands stilled his hips, anchoring them as his tongue plundered Draco's arse again. It was hot, and felt so completely invasive - only it was Harry, his intimately familiar Harry, and it was wonderfully erotic, too.

It had been rather unexpected the night before, and Draco hadn't been expecting a repeat performance quite so soon. Not that he was complaining. His hands were gripping the bars so hard his knuckles were white. Zabini was sucking hard, and it was true, he *was* still rather good at giving head. Last night, Draco had come just from the rimming, never mind being sucked off

at the same time. It was almost too much to bear. Zabini sucked harder, and Harry did, too. Draco had a brief, mental picture of how close their two faces must be, without Zabini's even knowing it, and came. Harry's hands were stroking down his thighs as he did, and Zabini let go at just the right moment.

Zabini stood. "My turn," he commanded, his voice husky. He shoved his cock through the bars.

Draco found Harry's hand and pulled him up. "Help me," he whispered, guiding Harry's hand along with his own to reach for Zabini's cock. "Look me in the eye," Draco ordered Zabini, and began to rub. "Do you know where my father will be in two weeks?"

"I wanted you to suck," Zabini complained, albeit breathily.

"I can't ask you questions and suck at the same time. Besides, no part of you will ever be inside me, understand? Answer the question and be happy that I'm touching you at all." Harry's soft laugh, just a breath, was in his ear. Appreciative. An invisible hand massaged one of Draco's arse cheeks. Draco gripped a little harder, Harry's hand over his.

"Okay, fine. He'll be in London, looking for you," Zabini said, closely his eyes. "Harder!"

Draco squeezed hard enough for it to be seriously painful, but Zabini wasn't complaining. "Eyes open," he said. "Good. And if I'm not in London? Will he be tracking me?"

"Yeah. Oh, *fuck*, yeah…"

Draco jerked furiously, wanting to bring Zabini just to the coming point. "Do you like it?" He made his voice as liquid-smooth as possible.

"Gods - yes - yes - fuck, Draco - " The eyes had closed again, squeezed tight, and Harry's hand squeezed lightly over his in warning. Draco knew, though. Now was the moment.

"Where's Voldemort?" he demanded.

"Fuck - fuck, Draco - I c-can't - "

"Yes you can! Tell me, or I'll hex your hands so that you can't touch yourself! Tell me!" Draco commanded, his hand slick with Zabini's precome now.

Zabini gave a small cry of frustration. "No!"

"Yes!" Draco stopped moving his hand and squeezed around the base to prevent him from coming. "Tell me!"

Zabini wavered. Draco *squeezed*, and felt the other's resolve break, thighs trembling with need. "Perth!"

"Perth?" Draco repeated, suspicious.

"Yeah. Please, Draco, goddammit, please!"

Draco began to stroke again. "What's he doing in Perth?"

"Just - making plans, I think - I don't know!"

"But he's there?" Draco confirmed.

"Yes!"

"Good boy." Draco increased his speed and let Zabini come, which he did with another cry. One would think he hadn't spent the past twenty-four hours jerking off, Draco thought, wrinkling his nose at the sight of Zabini's cock exploding come everywhere. He heard Harry's quiet spell and saw his clothes spelled clean. He let go of Zabini's cock. "Thanks." This last was murmured as an aside to Harry.

Zabini staggered back toward his cot and collapsed on it, head in his hands. "Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck - I can't believe I told you that. Fuck! They're going to kill me!" He looked up at Draco, terror-stricken. "They will, you know! They'll fucking hunt me down and kill me! I've seen them

do it before!"

Draco shrugged. "You picked the wrong side," he said. "They're not the greatest here, but they'd never do that. I don't think."

Zabini curled on his side and started to cry. It was not a pretty sight; he was cradling himself, moaning "oh gods" every so often, between choked moans and the occasional sob. Draco reached out, feeling for Harry, and felt Harry take his hand. "I'm going to go now," Draco said softly. "I'm glad you told me." It seemed a little rude to say, given Zabini's obvious distress, but it was the closest he could come to saying thank you.

They left the tent.

* * *

When they were out of sight of the unknown Auror, Harry made himself visible again. "Perth," he said, and wove his fingers into Draco's.

Hooch was crossing the field, heading for the staff tent, but wasn't looking their way. "Trees," Draco said. "Let's go talk for a minute."

Wordlessly, Harry agreed, and they veered off to the left. Harry went in first and found a fallen tree to perch on. "I don't think he was lying," he said. "Do you?"

"No," Draco said. "He was always a terrible liar."

Harry grinned. "And you had him in a rather compromising position," he said.

Draco grinned back. "I obviously could have waited another second. I wanted to get him to the point where he couldn't refuse anything I suggested. I'll have to improve my coercion techniques."

Harry reached for him and pulled him close. "I like you just like you are," he said, wrapping both his arms and legs around Draco.

Draco kissed the top of his head. "Thank you, by the way," he said. "I can't tell you how amazing that felt. You'll have to let me try that tonight. And it felt good, having you there with me, getting Zabini to talk."

"We did it together," Harry said simply. "He really does have a fixation with you, doesn't he?"

"I told you," Draco said darkly. "He just wouldn't leave me alone."

"Do you think there's something wrong with him?"

"Yeah, I do," Draco said. "I think he might actually be a bit off. You know, in the head."

Harry sighed. "Poor guy."

Draco hugged back hard and laughed. "And you used to be so jealous of him," he teased.

"I know," Harry said ruefully. "Look what you've done to me. I've gotten all soft."

"Not where it counts." Draco pinched his arse, lightly.

"Git." Harry leaned back and pulled Draco's face down to his. They kissed for a long moment.

"So, you didn't mind all that, then," Draco said, just to confirm.

"No, I didn't, actually," Harry said, sounding thoughtful. "I thought I might. But we did it together."

Draco hugged him again, shoving down that mental voice that told him it was *he* that was getting soft. "Yes, we did," he said. "So, now what. You want to go and report to Dumbledore?"

"Sure."

* * *

Draco scratched at the tent flap. Hooch answered, eyebrows raised. "Can I help you?"

"Please. We'd like to see Dumbledore," Draco said briefly.

"One moment." Hooch disappeared, then came back. "Come in, then."

Dumbledore was sitting at the table, apparently playing chess with Snape, while Moody looked on. Draco cut his eyes at Harry, lips quirking. Harry returned the smirk - Friday nights in the staff tent! Clearly the hot spot of the camp! Dumbledore took a sip of what smelled like port and waved them over.

"Good evening," he said cheerfully, seemingly determined to overlook the fact that they were both furious with him. "Come and sit down."

Draco lifted his brows. "We need to talk to you. And maybe Snape, too. In private."

Draco caught the looks flying back and forth, between McGonagall, Shacklebolt and Hooch, peripherally, and ignored them. Dumbledore glanced at Snape. "It can't be dealt with in front of the other staff?"

"No," Draco said flatly.

Snape turned his head and met Draco's eyes for a long moment. He looked back at Dumbledore. "We could go to my tent."

Dumbledore nodded. "Alright, then," he said, and the two of them got to their feet.

They walked in silence between the two older men. Once Snape took down the eight or nine layers of wards barricading his tent, they all filed inside. Draco was not even remotely surprised

to discover that the staff were permitted to make magical alterations to the insides of their tents. While the staff tent was merely a large tent, the inside of Snape's resembled a small flat. A very small flat, but still. He waved them all toward chairs. Dumbledore immediately transfigured his into something softer. Draco just sat on what was available, and Harry sat down to his right. The edges of their trainers were touching, but nothing else. Snape glanced at this, looked at Draco pointedly, but said nothing.

"I'm thirsty," Harry announced, in a tone that suggested to Draco that he was almost deliberately trying to provoke Snape. "Do you have anything to drink?"

Snape's lip curled. "I do not waste my storage space with pumpkin juice and butterbeer, Mr. Potter. If you require refreshment, you will have to make do with the options on hand."

Draco smiled at him. "Which are?" he prompted.

Snape tried to glare, but didn't really succeed. "Water or firewhiskey," he muttered.

"Firewhiskey would do nicely," Draco decided. "Two, please."

It was a small battle, but did much to establish that the ball was in their court, and that they knew it. Snape, granted, gave both glasses to Draco, without meeting his eyes. Draco merely rolled his own and handed one glass to Harry.

"So," Dumbledore said pleasantly, sipping the glass of port he'd brought with him from the staff tent.

Oh, but the moment was sweet! Draco crossed one knee over the other and looked at Harry. "Do you want to tell?"

Harry shook his head. "You should. It's because of you."

Draco smiled and turned back to the older men. "We know where Voldemort is."

Snape choked on his firewhiskey (apparently tolerating Harry's presence in his living quarters

required a little liquid aid to be stomached). Dumbledore's glass simply froze at his lips. "You do," he said evenly.

"Yes, we do," Draco confirmed.

Dumbledore set the glass down, carefully. "Zabini?"

"Obviously."

"How do you know he is telling the truth?"

Draco hesitated and glanced at Harry. "We're both sure of it," he said. "He was… not really in a position to be… creative about that kind of information."

"Surely," Snape cut in, voice harsh, "you are not suggesting that you devised your own methods of torturing the prisoner."

Draco met his dark gaze. "Actually, yes," he said coolly. "That's exactly what I'm saying. It's nothing that wasn't already sanctioned - or practically shoved down my throat, in fact. He wasn't in pain."

Snape looked positively apoplectic over Draco's choice of words and cut his eyes to Harry. Draco caught the unspoken question and said, very calmly, "Oh, yes. Harry was there. He was helping me."

Dumbledore's brows went up at that. "And you are certain that he was not simply creating answers in order to be… released… from whatever it was with which he was being inflicted?"

"Yes," Draco said tersely. "He's really upset with himself for having said. He was crying." He paused. "Which brings me to something else, actually - I don't think he's well. In the head, I mean. I - we both think there's something wrong with him."

"I have wondered, myself," Dumbledore admitted. "I also suspected that he knew more than he was letting on, but I was debating with myself how fair it would be to torture someone in that

mental condition."

"Well, he was happy with this particular method of extortion," Draco said dryly. "I'm not going to do anything of the sort again. But I'm sure he was telling the truth."

Snape leaned forward. "Where is the Dark Lord?" he asked, in clear, precise syllables.

Draco looked him straight in the eye. "Perth," he said, and was very conscious of the fact that he was telling Snape, not Dumbledore. "And my father is scheduled to be in London, looking for me, in two weeks' time."

"Yes, there's quite a mark on your head," Snape said quietly. "And your father wants to be the one to do it. It is imperative that we keep you well out of his reach."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Severus, would you be so kind as to inform Alastor and Kingsley of our findings? I just have another matter to clear up. I will, of course, set your wards back in place when we are finished here."

Snape stood, abandoning the firewhiskey. "Should I bring them back here?" he asked.

"Actually, yes, if you don't mind - that might be a better plan," Dumbledore agreed. "And then owl the Order, if you would. We need to meet immediately."

Snape nodded and departed without a word.

"One more thing," Dumbledore said, when the door - door? - surely it was just a tent flap, really - closed behind Snape. "We have been thinking over the arrangements for this first assignment, beginning in September."

Draco's pulse increased subtly. "How so?" he asked, mouth dry. Harry's foot pressed into his a little harder.

"In light of recent events and information," Dumbledore said slowly, "it seems that you are in rather more danger than I was hoping. Your father is apparently on quite the rampage. I managed

to get that much from Zabini, myself. It would be safer to have more people with you, after all. So - *no*, Harry, I am *not* reassigning you, so please desist with that look at once. However, the Weasley twins have persuaded me that they could be of some value to you and Professor Snape both, so I am going to send them with the two of you."

It was better than he could have hoped, given that he'd been positive that Dumbledore still wouldn't let them go together. Draco felt cautiously pleased about the whole thing. He looked at Harry, whose expression was mixed.

"Is that… more to your liking?" Dumbledore asked carefully.

Draco nodded. "More, yes," he said. "I'm glad you're seeing it that way, with them having come along yesterday and everything. I still have to say that it's a pretty raw deal, for both of us, though."

Harry nodded. "And I still don't really think it's necessary," he put in, moodily. "But I'm glad you're not just sending Draco off practically by himself again, I guess."

Dumbledore's white brows met his hairline. "I would hardly consider Professor Snape's presence to define one as being alone," he said.

"Whatever. More is better," Draco interrupted, before Harry could explode. He nudged his lover's hand. "Right?"

Harry got to his feet. "I still can't believe you," he said to Dumbledore. "We just told you where *Voldemort* is - and you still won't let us work together. If I wasn't afraid being killed the instant I step out of this camp and blow it for all wizarding kind, I swear I'd ditch this entire thing tonight. I would."

His cheeks were red, and Draco was half-expecting an explosion, anyway. Dumbledore just nodded, though. "I am sorry that you feel that way."

Harry stared at him for another moment, but Dumbledore just gazed into his port. Harry tore his eyes away. "Come on," he said tersely, to Draco.

Draco followed him out.

* * *

"I really am glad for you," Harry said morosely, his hand moving restlessly against Draco's chest. "I don't want you to think I'm not. At least you'll have some friends with you, too. You won't be all by yourself with Snape."

"He wasn't bad, on our own, actually," Draco said. "I just hope having Fred and George along doesn't put him in a permanently bad mood. They have almost as bad an effect on him as you do."

Harry tilted his head up. "I hate this fucking war."

"So do I."

"If we have sex again, do you think we'll feel any better about it?"

"No, but at least we'll be having sex again," Draco said, and they both smiled. Draco rolled over onto Harry and brought their mouths together. "I love sex," he murmured against Harry's lips.

Harry giggled. "So do I," he said, as though it were a guilty confession.

"Good. Let's do it again, then."

* * *

Several days later, on Tuesday evening, Snape owled Draco to let him know that Pomfrey had examined Zabini extensively, and that she, too, found him to be mentally disturbed. She had no diagnosis, but had recommended that Zabini be moved to St. Mungo's for the duration of the war. Snape went on to point out that St. Mungo's had a ward for the criminally dangerous, which was certainly where Zabini would be kept. He wanted Draco's opinion on it, though.

Draco was alone in his tent when he got the scrawled missive (delivered by Hedwig), waiting on Harry, who was currently having what he called "Ron time". Draco found his letter of response to be one of the hardest things he'd ever written, when all was said and done. There was a hard lump of bitterness in his throat as he signed his name and sealed the scroll. What had the world come to, that two months after graduating from school, he was signing his name to something that would effectively seal the fate of a former classmate of his for good. Sure, Zabini had never been a friend. Sure, he was a Death Eater - though even that fact was still oddly surreal. Draco half-expected that he would wake up in his dorm bed at Hogwarts one of these mornings, to hear Zabini snoring across the way. Only that would mean there was no Harry, either, except for those bitter exchanges in the Owlery, and even if he had only been waking up beside Harry for the past month and a half, it didn't change the fact that it now felt like a permanent arrangement.

One that had about two weeks' life left to it. Draco fixed the scroll to Hedwig's leg without meeting her eyes. His own were dry and burning. "Take this to Snape, please," he said softly.

She gave him a soft hoot and a gentle brush of the wing on her way out. Draco stayed where he was, crouched in the doorway of his tent, watching her go. Her small form was a mere pinprick as she circled the camp, seeking Snape - a white speck against the darkening slate of the skies, clouding over in preparation for the coming storm.

A/N: Thoughts? Comments? Indulge me. :)

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Chapter: 24

Chapter 24: The Last Days

Draco woke with a start in the middle of Tuesday night, a low rumble of thunder finally puncturing his sleep. From the way the blankets were twisted around his legs, he guessed that he'd been tossing and turning for some time, if not outright thrashing. There was sweat on his forehead, and his heart was pounding. What was it? What had he been dreaming about? He lay still, trying to get his heartback down to normal speed, trying to remember.

Zabini. That's what it was. He'd been dreaming about Zabini. He... Draco couldn't put his finger

on what exactly it was he was feeling, not for several minutes. Then it hit him. He felt guilty. Really guilty. Nearing-panic guilty. What had he done? He'd shamelessly seduced someone who obviously had no power to resist him whatsoever, possibly condemning him to death at the hands of the likes of Draco's own father, or worse. And if he was considered mentally ill enough to warrant being transferred to the criminals' ward of St. Mungo's - that just made everything a billion times worse. He'd seduced someone who was sick, who didn't have the power to defend himself. Draco felt sick.

He turned over on his side, facing away from Harry. How could Harry have let him do it? And what was Harry going to think, when he reached the same conclusions that Draco had? Would his own guilt, combined with his disgust for Draco neutralize their entire relationship?

The panic grew to epic proportions, and Draco felt like he was suffocating. He'd never felt a need to apologize like this before, to attain some sort of forgiveness or absolution that possibly no one could give him. He felt terrible.

Harry stirred behind him. "Rrryouwake?" he slurred sleepily.

"Yeah."

Harry turned over, facing him. "How come? It's the middle of the night."

He sounded more awake already, and concerned. Draco lay still, his hands crunched between his chin and his chest, and couldn't answer.

"Hey." Harry shook his shoulder lightly. "What's going on?" He moved over and propped himself up on one elbow, peering worriedly down at Draco.

Draco hunched his shoulders even higher. Could he even talk about it? Would that help, or make things worse? Finally, he said, "I'm having a Gryffindor moment."

Harry laughed uncertainly. "Oh? How so?"

His anxiety made him snappy. "Oh, I don't know. Possibly because I think I might just be a really horrible person, is all."

"No you're not," Harry protested, tugging at his shoulder, trying to get him to turn onto his back.

Draco resisted. "Yes I am. I took advantage of a sick person, who couldn't have resisted even if he wanted to."

Harry paused, his hand stilling on his shoulder. "I don't think he wanted to," he said, after a bit. "You could also see it as having finally given him a little of what he wants so badly."

Draco did turn, then, lying on his back and looking up at Harry. "Do you really see it that way?" Another low roll of thunder sounded, but so far, it wasn't raining. The air was heavy with electricity or magic; Draco wasn't sure which it was.

Harry slid his hand across Draco's bare chest. "Sure," he said. "I mean, you knew he was rather obsessed with you. But I don't think that it really became apparent until the end, there, when he started crying, that maybe there's something more wrong with him. And they can't even be sure that he's really sick. He could be, oh, what does Hermione call it - obsessive-compulsive, or something."

Draco thought about that. Granger's jargon actually made sense. "And it seemed like he was making sense, when it came to talking about being a Death Eater and stuff," he said, trying to make himself believe that he wasn't just trying to rationalize it. He really *was* turning into a Gryffindor - Slytherins, as his father had so often reminded him, took what they wanted and didn't think about any interests other than their own. Guilt complexes belonged to the other Houses, especially Gryffindor.

"Yeah, it did," Harry agreed. His hand strokes were soothing, and helped calm Draco down. "And you're not feeling guilty about - about the seduction bit itself, are you?"

"Maybe a bit," Draco admitted. "I don't like thinking that I let someone else blow me while I'm with you. Very un-Slytherin, I know. But I don't feel great about it. And I kind of feel like it compromises my dignity, somehow - here I was, vehemently protesting this entire deal with Dumbledore using me as an extortion tool - and then I go off and do it myself. *With* my equally-protesting boyfriend."

Harry bent and brushed his lips over Draco's. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I know where

your loyalties are. That's how I'm looking at it, that you just took pity on Blaise, a bit, and also got him to tell you the most important piece of information he has. We needed that - our side, I mean. And no one else would have been able to get it from him. It was for the cause. And given what you were doing, I think you did it in the least-compromising way possible. You weren't *really* kind to him, but you weren't really nasty. I don't feel like you betrayed me. Mind you, we don't need to have any more threesomes in the near future, either, but still."

Draco laughed bitterly. "We'll be lucky if we get *twosomes* in the near future," he pointed out. "And after we just *proved* how effectively we work together, too. But no, I don't ever want to do that again, either. Gods, Harry - who knew that being with you would turn me into such a Gryffindor? I've caught your guilt complex."

"It's not generally considered an STD, you know," Harry said, his voice suddenly full of laughter. His fingers were moving gently in Draco's hair. "I love you." He brought his lips down again, then paused, waiting.

"Git," Draco said, smiling, and pulled Harry down to him. "I love you, too." Their mouths melted together for several long moments, and Draco felt the tension drain away.

"Feel better about it?" Harry asked softly.

"Yeah. Thanks."

"No problem." Harry rolled back onto his side, away from Draco, but had caught Draco's hand and pulled him over with him, trapping Draco's arm around his waist. "Let's sleep like this," he proposed, his voice already sleepy again.

Draco shifted over so that the full length of his body was curled against Harry's permanently-warmer one. "Okay." He mouthed a kiss onto Harry's spine, and blew the wild, dark locks out of his face. They slept.

* * *

The twins had been full of glee upon learning that they were, indeed, going to be going with Draco and Snape for their first assignment, at least. They'd already compiled a list of things to do to, as Fred put it, "keep Snape in his place" - a list which made Draco's heart sink every time they

revealed another entry on it.

"Come on," he'd pleaded to George, in vain. "Don't make it worse. He's really an okay sort if you're not getting on his nerves. He's been really decent to me recently, and I want to keep that going."

"Aw, Draco," George had grinned, slinging an arm around his shoulder, "you make it sound like you don't *want* us to come!"

"No, I do," Draco had protested. "Really. If I can't go with Harry, then this is the next best thing. But I just don't want you two antagonizing him all the time."

Fred had sat down on Draco's other side, with a somewhat serious look on his face. "Hey, relax. We know Snape's your sort-of mentor. We don't bugger things up. We never cause actual *harm*, Malfoy. We just... make things more fun. Didn't we do a good job of covering your arse last time?"

"Yeah," Draco had admitted.

"Then relax," Fred reiterated. "Granted, we won't be covering it the way Harry does, no doubt, but - "

He got no further. Draco had shot to his feet, embarrassed. Of course he *knew* the twins knew about them. But that did *not* mean that he needed Fred Weasley making little jokes about it all the time. "We are *not* talking about that!"

The twins were laughing, though, unrepentant. "Just my little joke," Fred had said, in what he must have thought was a reassuring manner.

Draco had checked the time, then, and noticed it was almost time for the regular Sunday Quidditch game, and pointed this out.

* * *

Later on Wedneday, after his fourteenth cup of coffee or so, Draco finally felt awake again. Heading to lunch with Harry, he caught sight of another training group merging with theirs, coming from another field. Krum was among them, and it occurred to Draco that he'd meant to talk to him again sometime. "Hang on," he told Harry. "Save me a seat at lunch. I just want to talk to Krum for a minute."

Reminding himself that he wanted to talk to Snape, too, Draco moved briskly toward Krum. The other saw him coming, and dropped back from the rest of the group, which contained Macmillan, Abbott, Goldstein, Longbottom and Brown. His face was questioning, and Draco fell into step beside him. "Hi."

"Hello," Krum said slowly. Obviously wondering why Draco was talking to him.

Draco half-wondered, himself. "How's it going?"

Krum shrugged. "Fine," he said. "Ve vere practising hexes again today, and I haff still a stinging hex on my arm."

"Where?"

Krum pushed up his sleeve and showed Draco. "And I cannot remember the spell to heal it," he added.

Draco did, though, and did it. "How's that?"

Krum inspected his arm. "Much better. Tank you."

"No problem. I just wanted to say hi, I guess," Draco said. "I haven't talked to you since that time."

Krum nodded. "Right. But you haff been gone, apparently. I heard the rumours."

"Did you? I see," Draco said.

"Your placement, next month," Krum said, "is it this sort of ting? Vot do you call it, espionage?"

"Yeah, that's what you call it," Draco said, sighing. "And yes, that's what I'm doing. I'll be working with Snape, and the Weasley twins will be our back-up's."

"Your...?"

"Our seconds," Draco restated, using the older word.

Krum got that and nodded his comprehension. "Oh," he said. "Vell, I do not know vot I am doing yet, but I vill be vith Macmillan, and the other one, Goldstein, I tink. Othervise, the staff haff not said."

"I don't think most people know their assignments yet," Draco said, with a frown. "I know Harry doesn't yet. Of course, that could just be because he's Harry, and no one ever tells him anything." He knew he sounded bitter, but couldn't keep it out of his voice.

Krum gave him a curious look. "You and Harry," he said slowly, "you are very good friends."

It was questioning, sort of, and Draco realized belatedly that Krum didn't know about them yet. He *did* recall that he'd told Krum that Harry wasn't into girls, and now the other must finally be putting two and two together. "We're lovers," he said shortly. Krum was bound to figure it out, anyway.

Krum nodded carefully. "I vondered," he said. There was no repulsion in his voice, just plain, open curiosity.

They were nearly at the lodge. "How are you doing with the whole Granger thing?" Draco asked.

Krum sighed. "I don't know. Alright, I guess. I guess I knew she vould not go vith me."

Draco felt sympathetic. "But it still hurts," he said quietly, looking away.

Krum paused, then nodded.

If only you were into blokes, Draco thought randomly. *I know someone who's* dying *for company.* He didn't voice the thought. "Well, maybe - oh, I don't know. Never mind. I'm sorry, it really sucks."

Krum shrugged again. "Dere is more to life dan dat," he said, his accent growing more pronounced. "I vill survive." He gave Draco a half-smile, and Draco realized that he'd never seen Krum smile before.

He smiled back and opened the door for Krum. "Do you want to come and sit with us?" he asked.

Krum looked surprised, but pleased. "Alright," he said. "Vill - do you tink Hermi-on-y vill mind?"

"Probably not," Draco said. "Sit with Harry and me. You don't have to be right where she is."

Krum followed him to the table, and Draco wondered if his suddenly hospitable behaviour had something to do with his lingering guilt over Zabini, in some, remote way. Best not to think about it too hard, really. He sat down beside Harry and made Fred move down to allow room for Krum.

* * *

It was almost frightening, how fast the days flew by after that. Draco was constantly finding himself constantly distressed by the fact that the first of September was drawing ever nearer. It was already the last week, Wednesday again. They were breaking camp on Sunday morning, heading for their respective destinations. They'd each found out their assignments now, and there was no more running or weight training - those activities had been replaced on the schedule with various meetings and consultations concerning the various tasks that had been appointed. Draco did not miss the running in the least, but it wasn't even a relief any more.

He had a mental countdown going, almost unconsciously, of how many days he had left with

Harry. He didn't even like thinking beyond that point. The assignments were meant to stay a secret. Harry still hadn't received many details on his. All he knew so far was that he, Granger and Weasley were supposed to be doing something that had to do with decoding Death Eater messages, which were apparently going to fill Dumbledore in on their strategies. No one knew what any of the other trainees were going to be doing, not even vaguely. Draco, Snape and the twins were to be continuing to spy on and possibly apprehend any possible Death Eaters. Draco had asked about Lucius. Snape had answered in a very non-specific fashion, in his standard oblique manner.

Draco had cleaned up his tent. There were still three full days before they were to leave, but he wanted to be ready to go at a moments' notice. So that he could spend the rest of his spare time doing what he really wanted to be doing - which meant doing anything with Harry, pretty much. Even hang out with Granger and Weasley, which was becoming necessary. They didn't even mind Draco being there for their unsupervised assignment talks, which were pretty fruitless anyway, given how little the three of them knew about it. Still. Their acceptance meant that Draco didn't have to amuse himself while he waited for Harry to emerge.

He knew he was being clingy as hell, and would have hated it if he'd had the energy to. But he didn't, and at the moment, Draco really didn't care. He had no idea how long it would be before he would see Harry again, after Sunday morning. It could be months. He didn't want to waste time.

The zipper sounded. Draco knew it was Harry before the other even came in; anyone else would have knocked (scratched).

"Hi," Harry said, grinning, though that little edge of strain was never all that far from the surface these days. "Last Quidditch game tonight!"

Draco smiled half-heartedly. "Could be the last we ever play," he said cynically. He was sitting on his bed, cross-legged, and didn't get up.

"Don't talk like that," Harry ordered, toeing off his trainers. "I've decided we have to win the war really fast, and then we'll be able to pursue our professional Quidditch careers again."

Sometimes, the light-hearted approach worked. Now was not one of those times, though. Draco didn't smile. Harry sighed and sat down in front of him, uncrossing Draco's legs and settling himself between them. His own legs wrapped loosely around Draco, Harry mirrored the motion with his arms, holding Draco tightly. "I know," he said, his voice as tight as his arms, though

Draco hadn't spoken. "I know, love."

Draco pressed his hands into Harry's back and couldn't say anything, thanks to the painful lump in his throat. After a moment, he gave in, slid his arms all the way around Harry, feeling his lover's ribs beneath his fingers, and laid his head on Harry's shoulder. How was he supposed to *do* without this? It was practically an addiction. Only, not a damaging one. It was like the air he had to breathe. Draco thought these words in his head and dismissed them, slightly horrified at how very corny they sounded.

They sat that way for a long time. Not speaking, not fucking (for once), just holding. Draco was very aware of the fact that he could feel his own heart beating, and could feel Harry's beating against his chest, too. Every so often, Harry would raise his own head from Draco's shoulder and press kisses into his hair. Later on, he gently pulled Draco's face up and kissed a path from his jawbone to his mouth. "I wish I could make you not sad about this," he said after, looking very much the Gryffindor he was - and very young for a moment, too.

Draco shook his head. "Don't. You can't." He leaned his forehead against Harry's, avoiding eye contact. "Tell me it's still going to be like this after - just after," he said.

"After our first assignment? After the war?" Harry asked.

"Either. Both. Whatever. Next time I see you, after this weekend."

"Don't be a git. Of course it will," Harry said firmly. "What, do you think I'm just going to forget all of this and move on to someone else, or something? Assuming I even make it through this?"

"Don't say that," Draco said, and crushed Harry almost violently against him. "I can't even think about that. I just wanted to hear you say that other part."

Harry pulled back only enough to kiss Draco with equal violence, if not more. Draco could feel his lips bruising and didn't care, he *liked* it - as though if he could get close enough to Harry, he could prevent their separation by sheer will power. Their tongues did furious battle for several long, wonderfully wet minutes.

Harry broke it off. "It's five to eight," he said. "Do you still want to play?"

Draco nodded. "Yeah. Last game and all."

Harry smiled and kissed him again. "Come on, then." He got to his feet and pulled Draco to his.

* * *

The game ended with Krum catching the Snitch. It had been close; Draco had been mere inches away before the other had zoomed in front of him and nabbed it. He'd also apologized profusely after, but he was so patently delighted about having gotten the Snitch that Draco forgave him. Harry had been Chasing again, at his own insistence. Both Krum and Draco had tried to offer their Seeking positions to him, but Harry wouldn't have any of it.

They walked back toward the tents with Granger, who'd come to watch, and Weasley. Weasley had made a point of awkwardly congratulating Krum on having caught the Snitch (they'd been on the same team, after all; perhaps Harry was more Slytherin than he was letting on), and now Krum was heading off toward the girls' tents, along with Macmillan, Abbot (who'd been watching), the Patil twins, and Goldstein.

"Draco," Granger said abruptly, "what's happened with Zabini? The last I heard, it was all still up in the air - that Pomfrey couldn't make up her mind, and that Dumbledore was undecided about it, too."

Harry's arm tightened around his waist. "They *are* sending him to St. Mungo's, just to check," Draco said. "They're sure he's obsessive-compulsive now, but they're not sure how much of it is sort of put on, like if it's because Voldemort made him that way, or how much of it is natural."

"What do you think?" Weasley wanted to know.

Draco was quiet for a moment. Then he said, slowly, "I think a lot of it is natural. There are times when he seemed like he was in his right mind; he seemed like the person I went to Hogwarts with. Other times, though, he seemed - well - disproportionately interested in the wrong things, like his priorities were all out of order. More interested in me, say, then in the fact that he was in prison. But then, when he told us where Voldemort was, he seemed to know exactly how bad it was that he'd said, and seemed to understand what the consequences would be if his side catches up with him again."

"Do you think Voldemort will look for him?" Granger asked, her voice almost hushed. "Do you think he'd go to St. Mungo's?"

Draco shrugged. "He could. I don't know. He's ruthless, but he's also got a war to fight. A Harry Potter to find and kill and all that."

Harry shivered slightly. Draco put his hand over the one on his waist and held it firmly.

"Depressing, isn't it?" Weasley said moodily. "I never liked him. But honestly, I never thought he was off his nut, exactly. Weird, when we've only just graduated two months ago, and now he's a Death Eater and going to St. Mungo's, of all places."

"True," Draco agreed. He still didn't feel great about the entire thing, and didn't really like talking about it.

As though Harry had picked up on this, he changed the subject. "So, those owls from Dumbledore," he said. "No training tomorrow, just meetings. I wonder if we'll find the rest out then."

"I hope so," Granger said at once. "It's driving me mad, not knowing!"

"And then there's that big meeting, all together, in the lodge on Saturday night," Weasley said. "I wonder what he's going to say."

"I guess time will tell," Harry said, sounding like he was lost in thoughts of his own.

* * *

Saturday night came all too soon. Draco found himself shuffling into the lodge with the rest of the trainees, Harry just ahead of him. The mood was somber. The tables had been removed, and rows of chairs took their place. They had been requested to sit in their working groups (staff aside), so Draco sat down between Harry and George.

Altogether, there were about sixty trainees, mostly comprised of recent graduates from Hogwarts of Draco's own year, a scattering from Fred and George's, a few from the year in between, and what Draco privately termed "the miscellaneous" - the few Beauxbatons students (none of which he'd gotten to know; they were all girls) and Krum. There were six or seven rows, and Draco was in the second or so. Granger had wanted the first, but Harry and the Weasel had talked her out of it.

Snape was sitting between McGonagall and, to Draco's considerable interest, Lupin, who seemed to have been invited for whatever reason. Madam Pomfrey was on Lupin's other side, and had engaged him in polite conversation. Draco stared at Snape until he'd caught the other's eye, and raised an eyebrow in Lupin's direction.

Most people would have blushed. Snape merely got a grey cast to his features and looked pointedly away. Draco fought down the urge to smile. He didn't feel much like smiling, anyway. He made a mental to note to ask Snape what Lupin had been doing there. After all, he'd have lots of time to talk to the man over the next, indefinite while.

Dumbledore bent to whisper something to Shacklebolt, who stood up and called the meeting to order. The murmuring around the lodge fell silent as soon as he stood.

"Good evening, trainees," he said, the low bass very smooth. "Thank you for being here. I realize the preciousness of your leisure time, especially now. However, it seemed to all of the staff here that we should meet as a full group one last time. I would also like to thank each and every one of you for your hard work over the past two months. We feel that all of you have improved your already considerable strengths and talents in this time, and have no reservations about sending any one of you out into the field. Tonight, we just want to cover a few logistics and let you in on what information we feel we can."

Shacklebolt paused and cleared his throat. "A few things," he said. "The information which you have gathered here is your own. The only limits we will ask you to observe are the following: the staff members associated with your training, the other trainees, your own assignments, and any knowledge you may have obtained about your colleagues assignments. For instance, if I know that Neville Longbottom is going to be working as an international translator along with Minerva McGonagall - which he will not, just for the record - if I am apprehended by Death Eaters, I will do very best at not letting on that I was in a training camp with either of these individuals, never mind what their current activities are. I think this is just common sense, really, but I thought I would spell it out nice and clear. Having said that, I would just like to say that it has been my privilege working with you and getting to know you better. Albus?"

Dumbledore stood, and Shacklebolt took his seat. "A few more logistics," he said. "Because this is a first assignment, I thought I would put a specific time limit on it. Two Saturdays from now, you will all Apparate from wherever you are to a location which I will reveal in a moment. This place will always be where you will come to make your reports and to be reassigned. It will also be the place where, unless other circumstances are arranged with myself or one of the other staff, where you spend your leisure time for the duration of the war. This place is highly protected, Unplottable and invisible to muggles. It is the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. It is protected by a Fidelius Charm, which I trust you all know about. I am its sole secret keeper, which means that you do not have the power to reveal its location or its significance to anyone. Should you attempt to do so, you will find yourself physically unable to render the name. Thus, it is ideal for our purposes. You are all considered affiliates of the Order of the Phoenix."

Dumbledore stopped and took a drink of what Draco guessed was port, again. "This brings me to my next point. Your leisure time will be determined as we go along, and will depend on how you are needed. There may be times when you find yourself in the field for months at a time; other times, your assignment may end after a week or even days. I will ask you to remember that we are at war. You all know what is at stake."

Now the older wizard turned to Moody, who gave him a sheaf of parchments. "Your groupings for this first assignment are most likely permanent. We have arranged you the way we have for very specific reasons. Do try to find the best ways to work within your group or with your partner. Should there be problems, we have assigned each group a particular member of the staff who will be directly responsible for you. I will now read these out."

Dumbledore began to read out groups, and Draco listened with interest, to see who had been paired with whom. He knew, of course, that Snape was the head of his own group, and assumed that Dumbledore was directly responsible for Harry's. The Patil twins were with another pair of twins from Beauxbatons. Goldstein was with Boot. Draco stopped listening after awhile, staring around at the various students. He heard his own name. Yes, it was Snape. And Dumbledore had, naturally, saved Harry's group for last, announcing himself as its supervisor. There was the expected ripple of murmuring at the grouping, and curious heads turned in Harry's direction. Draco wondered for a briefly ironic moment, how much greater the murmuring would have been if Dumbledore had read out his own name with Harry's.

He was clenching his fists again. Draco took a deep breath and let go. No point in getting all worked out about it. Two weeks. Then he'd see Harry again, providing they were both still alive.

"Now," Dumbledore said, and the murmuring died down again, "a bit of news. We know where the Dark Lord is. Yes, I know - please hear me out, however. I cannot tell you how we know this, but it is most certainly true. It has been verified through Veritaserum from a known Death Eater,

who shall also remain anonymous. The Senior Aurors from the Ministry who are also Order members will be pursuing this. It is our highest hope that we can make this the shortest war in the history of our kind. Now, before we dismiss, a few words of caution: trust no one but your teammates. Guard what information you have with all of your power. You will all be equipped with Veritaserum, a few potent healing potions, which Madam Pomfrey has kindly labelled. You are familiar with them all, and have actually brewed them all yourselves, here. Professor Snape has also assisted with some of the more difficult ones. Guard these as well; you yourselves know how long it takes many of these potions to be brewed again. Surrender your wands to no one. If there are emergencies, contact one of us by owl, or Apparate. The address must be memorized. It is number twelve, Grimmauld Place, in London. You can Apparate only to the doorstep; it is warded against Apparition. Floo-ing is possible, but we would prefer you not to. Are there any questions which must be answered now?"

There was a long silence. Dumbledore waited patiently. "Good," he said, after a few moments. He sat down.

Shacklebolt stood again. "Please meet between this building and the staff tent tomorrow morning at eight o'clock sharp. You will all Apparate at once, and we will dismantle the camp. Make sure you take any and all personal belongings, including owls and other pets, with you - we will not be leaving anything behind. Should you happen to leave behind a living creature by accident, it will be taken to Headquarters. Please say your goodbye's tonight as well; there will not be time in the morning. Thank you all very much, and have a pleasant night."

Shacklebolt nodded to them dismissively, and turned back to Dumbledore. Moody rose and joined them at once, followed by McGonagall. Snape, Draco noted amusedly, was still in his seat, talking quietly with Lupin.

Harry looked at him. "So?"

"So, what?" Draco stood and Harry followed. "I guess I should go and wish Krum luck, or something."

"I'll come with you."

They made the rounds together, covering most of the important people. Draco shook Krum's hand and the other surprised him with a gruff smile and a hope that they would run into each other some weekend. Finally, they were outside, still surrounded by chattering trainees.

Granger and Weasley came over then, followed shortly by the twins. They all started talking at once, but Granger fought her way between the others, over to Draco. "Good luck, Draco," she said, looking as serious as only Granger could look. "Stay safe, and all that."

"Sure, you, too," Draco said. "Keep H - keep those two alive, hey?"

Granger smiled warmly. "I will. I'll do my very best."

"I know you will."

"You stay alive, too," she said, and hugged him.

Somehow he'd known she was going to do that, and Draco hugged back, suppressing his sigh. Harry caught his eye during it, and grinned at him. Draco rolled his eyes and released Granger.

He turned to Weasley. "Good luck," he said.

Weasley shook his hand less limply than he might have. "You, too," he said. "I guess we'll see you in two weeks."

"Right," Draco nodded. "You've been there before, right?"

"Oh, sure, lots of times," Weasley said casually. "It's a huge house. Lots of room. Take care of yourself. I hope my brothers - well, I don't know. You seem to like them okay."

"Yeah, they're okay," Draco said, catching Fred's eye.

"Just okay?" Fred protested, shouldering his way into the conversation. "Don't believe him for a second," he told Ron. "Draco knows our value, don't you, mate?"

He laughed. "Of course I do. Anyway, I'll see you two tomorrow."

"And for many tomorrow's after that," George grinned.

"Too true," Draco admitted. "Well - it's been a blast, all. What time is it?"

Fred cast a *tempus*. "Just past ten."

Draco caught Harry's eye. Harry nodded subtly. "I think I'll turn in, then," he said. "Early morning and all."

Harry slipped around Weasley and came to stand close beside him. "Me, too," he said.

Granger narrowed her eyes at the both of them. "Don't even pretend you're even thinking about sleeping," she said in mock-contempt. "We *all* know better."

"Good," Harry retorted. "Shows you've got some sense, after all."

He ducked out of the way of Granger's smack, laughing, and his fingers caught Draco's in an attempt to keep his balance. The twins were making crude jokes to Weasley, who was brick-red, and Harry eventually pulled Draco away, to his relief.

Harry let go of his hand for the walk, but was never far enough away that their arms didn't brush fairly often. Part of the way back to Draco's tent, Harry looked around, checking how many people were about. There were a few, but not too close. "So," he said, as though resuming an earlier thought, "last shag for two weeks, hey?"

Draco gave him a thoroughly lascivious look. "We'd best make it count, then," he said.

Fire smouldered in Harry's eyes; he could see it even in the dark. "We will," Harry promised, his voice low and full of desire. "Get in there."

"Oh, I will," Draco said, cocking an eyebrow.

Harry laughed out loud. "Not that way. Well, maybe that way. But I meant the tent, git."

They stumbled inside, Harry pulling the zip down behind him. "*Silencio!*" He kicked off his trainers and stripped his t-shirt off. "I want you *now*."

"You've got me," Draco said, and ripped his own t-shirt off. He grabbed Harry by the shoulders and pulled him in, devouring his mouth. He transferred the kiss to Harry's right nipple, then trailed down to his navel, dipping his tongue in suggestively. "Strip," he ordered, fingers on the button of Harry's jeans. He stood up, and Harry went for his jeans, too.

They struggled out of the clothing as quickly as possible and moved together, naked. "How do you want to do this?" Harry asked, breathing fast. "I want this to be good."

"It's always good," Draco assured him. "I don't really care. What do you want?"

Harry sucked at *that* place on his neck. "I want you to fuck me," he said, voice muffled by that same spot. "Can we do that?"

"You don't have to tell me twice," Draco smirked. "But we're going to do this properly, then. Lie down."

Harry grinned at him even as he obeyed. "I love it when you get bossy."

"Good." Draco stood over him, one foot on either side of Harry's knees. Harry tilted back his head to gaze up at him, a slightly-goofy, very much lust-filled dreamy haze coming across his face.

"Gods, I love this angle of you," he said.

Draco sat down between Harry's knees, his legs over Harry's, and bent forward. "What about this one?" he threw back, and slowly licked the underside of his lover's erection.

Harry moaned. "Tha's pretty good, too," he slurred, eyes closing. "Can't even tell you how much I love it when you - *ah* - do that."

Draco did "that" again several times, swirling his tongue around the head of Harry's cock. There it was, the telltale drop of saltiness on the tip, in his mouth. Draco pressed his thumbs into Harry's hips, *hard*, wanting to *mark* him, leave some impression of himself on Harry as a reminder, until the next time. Harry was making inarticulate noises, his body at civil war with his mind as he tried desperately not to shove up into Draco's mouth, choking him. Draco took pity on him and began to suck in earnest, keeping his tongue taut along the underside of Harry's mouth, and employing his hands to the best of his (considerable) abilities. One hand replaced his mouth when he drew back to breathe, and the other was massaging Harry's balls, gently, the way Harry liked it, moving back slowly. Harry attempted to spread his legs, but couldn't due to Draco's legs trapping his in place.

Draco adjusted himself so that he was lying on his front instead; his hips had been getting sore from having his legs that wide apart, anyway. He slipped a saliva-slickened finger into Harry, free of lube, which they'd never attempted before. Harry was moaning loudly now, uncontrollably, and he lost the battle with his body. His hips rose off the bed, his cock pushing into Draco's throat. Draco slid his free hand to Harry's hips and encouraged it silently, letting Harry fuck his mouth. He had weeks to let his voice recover. Harry's breath hitched, and there was that little muscle spasm that meant - yes - Draco's mouth was suddenly full of Harry's hot release, or rather, his throat was. It slid down fairly easily from there; he hardly even tasted anything but the aftertaste.

Harry pulled him up with one arm, though gently enough that he didn't dislodge Draco's fingers, and kissed him hard. "That was incredible," he breathed. Draco could feel Harry's heart pounding against his, through their chests. His hand was patting about, feeling for the lube. "Where's - *accio* lube - oh, it worked - here - "

The tube was pressed into Draco's hand, but he waited for a moment, savouring the kiss and giving Harry time to recover. He continued with his plan to ravish Harry so thoroughly that the *world* would know he was his, damn it, and moved his mouth to Harry's neck. Harry shivered when Draco used his teeth, and it was definitely a turn-on. "You like that?" he murmured against Harry's warm, salty skin. "You like when I bite?"

"Yes," Harry breathed, his hands wandering down Draco's back. Draco still had two fingers in him, and his cock was achingly hard against Harry's thigh. "Gods, yes. More."

Draco worked the mark to perfection and began to create another, in the very hollow of Harry's throat. He licked almost hard enough to bruise, and moved his fingers a little. "Like this?"

"Ah - fuck, yeah - " Harry pushed himself against Draco's fingers. "Don't stop."

Draco lifted his face so that Harry could see it. "Not going to," he smirked. He reached for Harry's glasses and pulled them off, laying them as far away as possible. "I'm just giving you recovery time."

"You don't need to wait," Harry told him, still breathless. "I want you to fuck me. Now."

Draco shook his head. "I will. When you're ready." He returned his attentions to Harry's throat. When he was satisfied with that, he brought their mouths together against. Harry kissed as hard as he clung, wrapping his legs around Draco, one knee rubbing alongside Draco's ribcage. Draco felt, during the kiss, Harry hardening beneath him again, and finally let himself give in. He managed the lube cap one-handed and was pushing inside Harry within seconds.

Pacing himself in long, slow strokes to start with, Draco pulled his face back and just *watched* Harry's, while they fucked, never breaking eye contact. "I love being inside you," Draco said, hearing the strain of desire in his raspy voice.

"Fuck, I love *having* you inside me," Harry said, "especially - *ohfuck* - when you do *that* - oh *gods*, Draco - !"

Draco grinned. "Like?"

"Love," Harry amended firmly. "I'm so close again already - this is what you do to me, you know."

"I know," Draco said, still smiling as his hips pumped rhythmically. There it was, though - the curl of sweet sensation rising from his belly, his balls, *sweet*, moving through him. "Gods, Harry - " He began to speed up, Harry's tight heat around him, clenching, urging him forward - Draco could hear himself gasping, could see Harry's eyes almost charcoal with desire beneath him, and remembered to bring him off again - he reached for Harry's cock, let his hand curl around it, stroking hard, timing it with his thrusts against Harry's prostate - not even knowing by now whose pleasure he was aiming for, exactly; it all felt so fucking good - and he came, *hard*, and it was almost blinding. White light exploded against the backs of his eyelids and Draco squeezed his eyes closed against it, his body lost to the explosion.

When he opened his eyes, his hand was wet with Harry's come, and he didn't even know when that had happened. He looked at it.

Harry was limp beneath him, boneless, and saw where he was looking. "At the same time," he gasped, still short of breath. "We came at the same time."

For some ridiculous reason, this made Draco inexplicably happy. "Did we?" he gasped back, and fell onto Harry's chest, still inside him.

Harry held him tightly. "Yeah." Their hearts were pounding against each other's, in a near but not duplicate rhythm. Draco brought his hand up to his mouth and started licking Harry's come from it.

"You don't have to do that," Harry said, watching him, still breathless.

"I know. I want to," Draco told him, and kept his eyes on Harry's as he did it. "I like the way you taste."

Harry actually coloured at that, and looked endearingly pleased. "Do you?" he asked.

Draco nodded. "Mmm-hmm. Does it look like I don't?"

"No," Harry said. He distracted Draco then by kissing him again. It lasted for some time. By the time it was over, in fact, much of the come had dried on Draco's hand. Harry noticed and made a face. "*Scourgify*," he said, but nothing happened. He shrugged. "Can't work every time. *Accio* wand." The wand flew to his fingers and he repeated the cleaning spell. "I don't want to move," he said. "I just want to spend the rest of the night like this."

Draco smiled. "I know. I don't even want to sleep."

"But we have to," Harry said softly. "I don't want you falling asleep on the job tomorrow."

"Likewise," Draco said. He slipped his fingers into Harry's tousled hair and stroked softly.

"You're my reason for getting through this, you know. I'll be counting the days until the Saturday after next."

"I honestly don't know how I'm going to get through that much time without you," Harry said. His dreamy, post-coital look had clouded over some, his green eyes bright.

Draco sighed. "I know," he said. "Can you owl me? Is that allowed?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "I'm not going to ask, though - I'm just going to do it. It's so handy that Hedwig figured out how to transfigure her colour like that."

"Smart girl," Draco said fondly. "I'll expect it, then. And I'll probably carry your bits of parchment around like a lovesick Hufflepuff."

Harry laughed and sobered. "You'd probably better destroy them, actually," he said seriously.

Draco shook his head. "Getting bossy," he chided, with a smirk.

"Thought you liked that," Harry said, smiling back.

Draco nuzzled his cheek. "I do." He inspected his handiwork at Harry's throat then, with deep satisfaction. "Don't hex these away in the morning," he said, touching one of them with his finger.

Harry's fingers followed, feeling it. "That's a good one," he said, wincing.

"Does it hurt?"

"Only a little. I won't. I want to see it there. Did you do it extra hard on purpose, so it wouldn't fade as fast?"

"Yes," Draco admitted. "I didn't want you to forgot about me, after all."

Harry frowned. "You keep saying things like that," he said. "I'm not just going to forget about you once I don't see you every day any more, you know. I *love* you, you git. This entire thing is not just some whim, or just something to keep me happy during training camp, you know."

"I know," Draco said, realizing how weak it sounded. "It's just - " he rolled onto his side, slipping out of Harry with a soft sound. "Where's your wand?" He took it from Harry and *scourgified* his lover clean. "I just keep thinking that it'll all seem like a dream or something, or you'll get back into your more normal context, with Granger and Weasley and realize that's more your thing, anyway. I don't know. I'm just being paranoid."

"Yes, you are," Harry said. "Stop it. I won't have it. I'll never change my mind about this. I *promise*."

Draco raised his head from the pillow and looked intently down at Harry. "Do you?"

"Yes," Harry said firmly. "I promise, Draco. Never."

A lump which Draco suspected was really very Hufflepuff came into his throat. "I love you," he said, which was not at all what he'd meant to say. "I mean, I promise, too. I'll never change my mind."

Harry's eyes *did* fill then, and what he attempted to say next was lost in a choking sound, just before he pulled Draco back to him. They held each other for a long time. Draco did his damnedest to hide the fact that he was crying, too, and just pressed Harry to him hard. It was much later when he finally spelled his wand to wake them, and they rearranged themselves slightly in order to sleep. They were as close as two people could be and still manage to be comfortable, and Draco liked it.

"I'm not going to be able to fall asleep without you," Harry murmured, his voice soft and sleepy.

"Me neither."

They held each other until they'd drifted off.

* * *

As per usual, morning came far too early. Draco shut his wand off quickly and woke Harry, who, as usual, hadn't heard it. He hoped Weasley would be good about making sure Harry woke up on time. Enough. There was no sense in thinking such things, now. They had a lot to do before leaving.

"Come up, get up, love," Draco said gently. "You've got to get dressed and take down your tent, still. Are you packed?"

Harry made a muffled sound of assent, and opened his eyes. "Gods, it's early," he said, and yawned.

Draco conjured coffee and handed a cup to Harry. "Drink it quickly and wake up," he ordered, sipping his own.

Harry pushed himself into a sitting position beside Draco, shivering. "It's cold," he complained, and wrestled with the blankets until he had one draped around his shoulders. "Are you cold?"

Draco nodded. Harry scooted over and wrapped both his arm and the blanket around him. They sipped in companionable silence for a few moments. *Our last morning together*, Draco thought before he could prevent himself from the nostalgia.

"It's not quite watching the sun rise, but it's still nice," Harry quipped, picking up on his thoughts.

Draco shivered and nodded. "Yeah. It is nice."

Harry laid his head against Draco's, and probably would have fallen asleep again, if Draco hadn't jogged him slightly. "Hey. Stop that. We have to get up," he said.

Harry groaned. "I knew you were going to say that. Bloody war. Bloody mornings. At least the coffee's good."

"Cheers," Draco said, and conjured him a refill. "I'm getting up now, and so will you, if you know what's good for you."

Harry sighed and allowed himself to be pulled up. They went through their usual ritual of showering spells and dressing, their coffee mugs hovering in the air. "I can't wait to get to Grimmauld Place and have a real shower again," Harry said, stepping into his newly-spelled-clean jeans.

"Don't remind me," Draco said, grimacing. "I've almost forgotten what it feels like."

"I hope Hedwig's back," Harry said. "I told her what time we had to go, but I had to let her out to hunt last night."

"I'm sure she'll have remembered," Draco said. He finished dressing, retied the laces of his trainers tighter, and shrank his bag. "We're just supposed to dismantle the tents, right? And then leave them here?"

"Yeah," Harry said vaguely. "And then they'll take them away later. Or Vanish them, or something. Okay, I'm going to my tent."

"I'll come with you," Draco said, suddenly anxious not to even be separated *that* long. Especially not now, so close to the end.

Harry gave him a brilliant smile, but said nothing.

* * *

The tents were all lying in sad, little heaps dotted across the field. Draco walked with Harry to the staff tent area, where most of the other trainees were already congregated. "I heard Neville overslept," Harry said, in an attempt at light conversation.

They were both feeling fairly heavy-hearted, but this was probably the best approach, Draco decided. "Really? I hope someone woke him," he said, not really caring.

"I think Ron did," Harry said, sounding like he didn't really, either.

Draco checked the time. It was eight now. Sure enough, Shacklebolt was there, and had magically magnified his voice, telling everyone to prepare for Apparation. The wards, he explained, would only be down very temporarily. They were to stand with their groups and coordinate their departures. Granger was calling Harry over. Harry's face took on a look of panic. "Just a second!" he called.

He turned to Draco and threw caution to the wind, launching himself at Draco. Despite Snape's presence and the twins' amused looks, Draco found that he didn't really care, either. They kissed fiercely, ignoring the looks and gasps all around them, arms tight around each other. Oh, how he would miss that, the sensation of having his arms filled like that. Draco's throat ached. "I love you," he whispered. "I'll see you in two weeks."

Harry nodded and swallowed hard. "I love you, too," he whispered back. "Stay safe. Two weeks."

"Owl me."

"I will."

Draco did his very best to smile. Harry smiled back, before Granger came and anxiously dragged him off, with an apologetic look thrown to Draco. Snape's heavy hand drew Draco back into the circle he'd created with the two Weasleys. Draco felt like his heart had been ripped out. It was only two weeks. He knew that. But somehow, it all felt like it was over.

"Get ready," Snape said, his voice a little harsher than it needed to be. George had touched his arm lightly and said something that Draco didn't hear. His eyes were on Harry's, until Harry had to look away to Apparate. He disappeared, and Draco nodded to Snape.

"I'm ready," he said.

"Steady on, mate," Fred whispered.

Snape gave the word, and they all disappeared.

A/N: So, thoughts? Tell!

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Chapter: 25

Chapter 25: The First Assignment

Draco shivered and unconsciously attempted to tighten his hooded sweatshirt. Northern Scotland was apparently freezing today. He was already in one of the worst moods he'd ever been in, and Snape wasn't helping.

Predictably, Snape was already infuriated with the twins, who hadn't really done anything offensive so far. It was just that they were strong-willed, Fred in particular, and used to either getting their own way, or, more frequently, making their own way happen. Snape was exactly the same way, and fights broke out over the first tent pitching. Draco was tired; the first day had been long and cold and he'd been thoroughly miserable for all of it, and he was already fed up with the griping. Snape's lance-like tones and Fred's particularly vocal complaints and snarkings right back - Draco had a headache.

He remembered what he was supposed to be doing, and lit a smokeless fire under the small cauldron. Right. Cooking. Draco loathed cooking, mostly because he'd never done any in his life before, but Snape was insisting that he learn. Draco conjured water into the cauldron and moodily contemplated Snape's instructions on making stew. *Better to figure this out than face two weeks of crumbly scones*, Draco thought sourly, and prodded the flames with a stick - not his wand, thankfully, which he'd been about to do.

Fred stomped over and sat down heavily, huffing. "I don't know how you can stand him, mate," he said darkly.

Draco was annoyed still more. "Well, why can't you just put the tent up the way he wants it done? Why does it have to be such a big deal?"

"There's no way anyone was going to see a tiny, two-person tent levitating in this little valley from miles and miles away," Fred snapped. "He's just being an arse because he can."

Draco rolled his eyes, but kept his mouth shut. He didn't really want Fred to be pissy for the next fortnight, but he knew that if he spoke, he'd take the other's head off.

George appeared and sat down by Fred. "Gods, it's cold," he said. He nudged his brother with his elbow. "Hey. I finished setting up."

"And Snape didn't kill you?"

"No, he's sulking in the other tent," George said. "Have fun with that tonight, mate." This was directed at Draco.

Draco shrugged and stayed quiet, willing the water to boil.

"Hey. Malfoy." George's tone softened. "You okay, or are you just feeling as pissy as the rest of us?"

Draco stared at the flames.

"Of course he's not al*right*, you git," Fred said tersely, to George. "He's been moping all day. What kind of a question is that?"

George shrugged. "Well, I'd be moping, too," he said. "So, stew. You ever made stew before, Malfoy?"

"*No.*" It came out more irritably than he'd meant, but Draco just scowled.

"Me, neither. This should be fun." George summoned the food pack and opened it. "Let's see, we've got magically-frozen beef, onions - those are going to need chopping - celery, gross - carrots - okay, I guess - and - hold on - spices." He raised his head triumphantly. "This should be easy! Here, Malfoy."

Draco looked. George was proffering a small, cylindrical container. "What is it?"

"Garlic. Put some in the water. Lots."

Snape came over then, just in time to witness Draco's ceremonial first bit of cookery. "Is that enough?" Draco asked sulkily, of George.

"Probably a bit more," George advised. "Here, Fred. You get this lot chopped, and I'll sort the beef."

Snape cleared his throat. "I was under the impression that Malfoy was making the meal," he said stiffly.

George just shrugged again. "So? We're helping. Is that a problem?"

Snape just sighed and wandered off again, probably, Draco thought, contemplating how little was going to be done *his* way for the next two weeks.

* * *

The stew was a success. Draco was rather inordinately pleased with how well it had come out in the end, though his own skills had had little to do with it. By the time they'd finished and cleaned up, it was dark and he was more than ready to sleep.

Snape had eschewed the notion of one big tent, saying that it would make him feel like a counsellor at summer camp, and brought two hardly larger than those they'd had over the summer, banished the twins to one of them. This first night, the twins would take turns watching. The next night was Draco's watch first, and then Snape's. That, Draco had pointed out to Snape, privately, was one of the serious advantages of having more than two people along for the ride. Snape had just sniffed at the time, but he hadn't refuted the point. He was probably right glad about it, too, Draco figured.

Snape was fussing with his bedroll, trying to get it exactly right. Draco was too tired to care, and crawled into his own with relief, not changing out of his clothes. It was too cold. "Mind if I do a

heating spell?" he asked rhetorically, not expecting a response.

Snape harrumphed a bit more, then said, "The temperature is perfectly adequate."

He was just being argumentative because he was in a bad mood, and Draco knew it. He gritted his teeth together and said, "It's fucking freezing. I have my *shoes* on. Can I please warm it up a bit?"

He half-expected Snape to say something cutting about *why* Draco was cold, and in the moment that followed, surely Snape was thinking about it. He didn't though. He simply muttered a "*Fine*, then," and Draco performed the spell.

There. It was marginally warmer, almost enough to make it bearable. Draco shoved himself deep under his sleeping bag and tried to sleep.

It was more awkward than it had been, the last time he'd shared a tent with Snape. The other was not asleep yet, either, if his breathing was anything to go by. Draco was longing for him to drift off already, so that he could have a moments' peace before succumbing, himself. He pulled the sleeping bag even higher, practically over his head. He'd been trying not to think about Harry, but a wave of miserable yearning swamped him suddenly, and his throat was tight. He wondered if Harry missed him yet, or if he was too busy having fun with Granger and Weasley to have remembered. And Draco was stuck with a very ill-tempered Snape and the twins, who were his friends, definitely, but as long as they were going to be griping at Snape all the time, it was bound to be a miserable time.

He promised nothing would change, a small voice in Draco's head prompted in reminder. *Just hold onto that.* That did it. Ridiculous tears welled up in Draco's eyes and he wiped them away on his sleeping bag. It was just so difficult to believe that it could possibly be true. Oh, he didn't doubt that Harry had *meant* it - but how could he even know how he would feel after the time apart? After months apart? *Stop it,* Draco told himself furiously. The very last he needed was for Snape to hear him, or to figure it out. He'd never hear the end of it, then. Snape would probably lose all respect for Draco and continue being an arse for the rest of the war.

It didn't help. The tears fell faster, but at least he was keeping his breathing quiet.

Snape stirred. "Malfoy?" His voice was a bit scratchy, but he sounded perfectly awake.

Draco ignored him, silently absorbing the tears with a fresh bit of sleeping bag.

"Draco." The voice was gentler. When Draco still refused to answer, Snape sighed. "I know you are - distressed," he said awkwardly. "I… am sorry. But do try to sleep, alright? Being tired will merely make it seem all the worse."

Draco closed his eyes and wished Snape was on another continent. He continued to say nothing, and eventually Snape sighed again and shifted into a more comfortable position. When his breathing grew slow and steady, Draco finally relaxed a bit. He was still desperately unhappy, but tried to convince his body to do the same. He pulled his coverings tighter around him and tried to imagine he could feel Harry behind him, holding him. It almost worked. Draco fell asleep.

* * *

The next few days were better, but only very slightly. The twins and Snape settled into a tolerable level of bickering back and forth. Draco absolutely refused to mediate or involve himself in any way. No one seemed to mind this, which was good, because Draco really didn't care. Since George's first attempt to ask Draco how he was doing emotionally, no one said anything about Harry. Draco was glad. Sometimes he wished he could throw in stories about himself and Harry, the way the twins were always doing. "There was this time when Fred and I had gotten detention," George would start, and either he would tell the story by himself, or if Fred was there, he'd be chipping in with details of his own, or arguing with his twin about how it had actually happened. Most of Draco's stories about Harry had some relation to sex in the end, and while he didn't mind that in the least, it hardly made for good dinner conversation. He wished they'd had more time to just be a regular sort of a couple before their first serious separation.

Two weeks, Snape had snapped at Fred only the day before, was hardly a long time. Draco couldn't remember what they'd been squabbling about that time, but it didn't matter. He'd busied his own thoughts with mental spellwork review, not that he really needed it. It couldn't hurt to be on the ready, though.

Draco stopped at the top of the ridge, catching his breath. All that running, and a simple climb up a slope still winded him. Pathetic, really. Although, Draco reasoned with himself, looking back at George and Snape labouring up the mountain, it had been fairly steep. Fred had plunked down the food pack and was already rummaging about to find the cauldron. It was high time to eat - it was past three in the afternoon - and they were all starving. At the top of the ridge, Snape

had said, and Fred obviously meant to take him exactly at his word.

Draco went over and threw himself onto the ground near Fred, conscientious of his shrunken pack in the pocket of his jeans. "What are you making?"

"Something that's not stew or scones," Fred replied enigmatically. He withdrew the packet of dried cilantro and looked at it in musing speculation.

Draco, on reconsideration, pulled his tiny pack out of his pocket and enlarged it. He was already cooling off from the sweaty climb, and pulled out his other hooded sweatshirt, pulling it on over his first one. He probably looked ridiculous, but for once in his life, he didn't really care. It was fucking *cold*. Draco wondered what Dumbledore, in all his sainted wisdom, was doing at the moment, and wagered that it wasn't freezing his arse off in the Scottish highlands, looking for Death Eaters.

George appeared, panting. He collapsed wordlessly on the ground on Draco's other side. The first thing he did was to pull out his own pack, enlarge, and take out his cup. He conjured it full of water and drank deeply, refilling it several times. He filled it again. "Malfoy?" he asked, still breathing heavily, offering the cup.

"Thanks." Draco took it and drank, then refilled it and passed it silently to Fred, who accepted it with a nod of thanks.

"You look weird," George said, squinting at Draco against the light. "Are you wearing two jumpers?"

"Shut it," Draco said dismissively. He got up and went to see whether Snape needed help, or what. A quick look showed that Snape was sitting just below the crest of the ridge, his back to the top. He was leaning back on his elbows and smoking a muggle pipe.

"Snape?" Draco said, his voice reflecting his incredulity. "Forgive me if I'm wrong, but I could swear that you're *smoking*."

"Twenty points for observation," Snape replied dryly, not even turning his head. After a moment, though, he added, "Old habit," somewhat apologetically.

Draco took a few steps down and sat down by Snape. "Thought you'd gotten stuck down there or something," he said.

Snape snorted. "You thought wrong. I'm old and tired, but I'm not *that* unfit." He puffed languidly at the pipe, and Draco decided that he liked the smell of it, even if it got into his lungs and burned.

"I never thought I'd see you resort to a muggle vice," he said wryly.

"Sorry if I've destroyed any childish idolatry on your part," Snape sniffed.

He never used to use contractions around me before, Draco thought, pleased by the informality. "Not a problem." He wrapped his arms around his knees. "Fred's making something that, to quote, is 'not stew and not scones'."

"Hmm," Snape said neutrally.

"He was eyeing the cilantro," Draco added, for what it was worth.

Another non-descript sound. Snape clearly did not care any more, or else had decided to just let the twins do what they wanted, vis-à-vis domestic affairs.

"So," Draco said. "I noticed Lupin was there on Saturday, back at the camp."

"Did you now," Snape said idly, blowing a smoke ring.

Draco wondered whether that was magic or some special muggle skill. He didn't ask. "What was he doing there?"

Snape pulled on the pipe for a long moment. "Talking to McGonagall and Dumbledore, naturally," he said, his voice still very neutral.

"About what? What's he doing for the war?"

"I shouldn't tell you. Information is dangerous."

Draco sighed. "Okay, fine, then. Tell me what you were talking about with him."

Snape smirked, face still forward, not looking at Draco. "Nothing which concerns you."

"Tell me anyway."

"Obnoxious brat," Snape said, taking another deep puff. "It was merely - small talk."

"You don't do small talk," Draco said, grinning. Snape was a lot more languid, tired out and smoking, apparently. Perhaps it would save him getting hexed.

Snape just gave him a very dark look and said nothing.

Fred appeared then. "If anyone's interested," he said loudly, not naming names, "I made something to eat."

"What is it?" Snape asked, as though bored. Draco could see the spark of hunger in his eyes, though.

"Soup, I think," Fred said. "With sort-of dumplings I made out of the drier scones."

"Sounds delightful," Draco said decidedly, and got to his feet. He looked down at Snape. "Need a hand, there, or are you coming on your own?"

Snape glared. "If you are implying that - " he stopped suddenly, seeing Draco's smirk, and reigned in his temper. Struggling to his feet - he looked tired and stiff, to Draco - he turned and started up the remainder of the ascent. "Very witty. Must be what comes of spending too much time with Gryffindors."

"Oh, ha ha," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "Just try not to be a git for five minutes, okay?"

"I did. It was a long five minutes," Snape smirked back, and took his things out of his pocket to set on the ground near George. "Serve already," he ordered. "Some of us are starving."

Fred said something snarky right back, but Draco tuned it out. George had given him a bowl and a spoon, and Draco was too busy with feeding himself to pay them any heed. The next few minutes were spent in silence, and the contented sounds of four people eating ravenously. The soup was very good, and Draco silently toasted Fred's cooking skills.

"What's that?" George asked suddenly, peering further down the ridge on the other side.

Draco set his empty bowl down and craned his head to look. George was pointing, and Draco saw it: it looked like some sort of animal, hopping. Hopping up the hill, in fact. Toward them. Draco narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. What kind of an animal moved like that? "I don't know," he said, frowning.

Fred and Snape turned around, also looking puzzled. Then the creature gave another hop and lifted clear off the ground, moving as closely parallel with the slope as possible. And Draco realized. "It's an *owl*," he said. It was brown. It was - "Hedwig!"

He shot to his feet, fatigue forgotten, and clambered a short way down the far side of the ridge, ignoring Snape's call to stay where he was and to be wary. It *was* Hedwig, though, and Draco knew it was. "Hedwig!" he said again. "Come here, girl!"

She gave a happy-sounding hoot and flew to his knee. Draco was grinning and petted her excitedly. "Do you have a letter for me?"

Another hoot, and Hedwig did something that caused her head to disappear under one wing for a moment. Then she pulled out a piece of tightly folded parchment, not a scroll, and proffered it to Draco in her beak.

"Stop, Malfoy," Snape said, standing at the ridge of the hill, wand drawn. "It could be a trap."

Draco turned the parchment over and saw his first name scrawled in black ink on the reverse. Harry's scrawl. "It's alright," he said. "It's from Harry."

"But the owl could have been intercepted. And that is clearly not Potter's owl."

"Yes it is," Draco said, glancing back. "She changes her colour to camouflage. Show him, Hedwig."

Hedwig gave a loud hoot, flapped her wings and turned white. Another flap and she went brown again. One of the twins made an impressed-sounding noise. "Most peculiar," Snape said, sounding somewhere between cross and intrigued. "You knew she was capable of this?"

"Yes," Draco assured him. "She's very intelligent."

Snape nodded, a hand on his chin. "The hopping - I presume she was attempting to avoid detection, as you are in a most conspicuous position up here. A most intelligent bird, indeed."

"Right," Draco said. "So. Can I read my letter now?"

Snape just scowled and went back to where the twins were.

Checking to make sure that the three of them were all out of sight, Draco unfolded the parchment, his fingers almost ripping it in his anticipation. The writing was crunched together in Harry's messy scrawl.

Dear Draco,

How are you? Any luck finding anything yet? How is it, where you are? I'm fine here. We're mostly around somewhere not far from where you grew up, and it makes me think about you all the time. So far, it's pretty dull. I spend a lot of time trying to decode things. Don't know why I, of all people, have to do this, it's really more H's thing, but I guess it's better than some of the options.

R & H bicker a lot, but I guess I'm used to it. Or I used to be. Now, I mostly just try really hard to think about what I'm doing, so I don't make mistakes. I miss you so much my eyes hurt. How are your people? Has anyone killed anyone else yet? Are you eating enough? I am, before you can ask. I swear I am. H makes me.

There's only nine more days until when I can see you again. I don't know if I can wait that long, I might go mad. I hate sleeping without you. I'd forgotten how R snores. He didn't when we were younger, it's a recent development. Besides, between you and me, I think they probably wish we had two tents. I do, too. I think I'd rather be alone.

R and H keep reminiscing about stuff, and sometimes I wish we'd gotten together back in school, so we could've at least had a Hogsmeade weekend together, or something. I swear, if we ever get out of this mess alive, the first thing we'll do is go on a proper date!

I saw AD the other day. Still pissed off at him, and he knows it. I hate it when he gets all sad about it, it makes me feel guilty for being mad. But then I think about you, and it helps. Gryffindor guilt complex, I know. Anyway, I'm running out of room. I hope Hedwig finds you okay. You can send her back to me - I have her cage here, in my pocket. Please write back, I'm pining without you here. I love you and I miss you so much.

Harry.

Draco's heart soared at the same time as that wretched lump came back to his throat. He re-read the letter four times before folding it back up. Trying to keep his voice steady, he stroked Hedwig again and asked, "Did you having trouble finding me?"

She gave a little shake of her wings and clicked her beak as though offended by the question. "Sorry, sorry," Draco said, smiling slightly. "Can you wait a bit? I want to write back." An affirmative hoot. "Good," Draco said. "Let me just get my stuff from up there. Stay here, alright?"

Another hoot, and Hedwig hopped off his knee. Draco got up and went back up the hill. The twins made immediate coy faces and probably would have said provoking things if Draco had let them. "Don't," he said sharply, forestalling it. Snape simply ignored him, brewing tea over the fire, and acting as though Harry's letter were a personal attack, or some sort of breach of their defenses. Draco ignored him, too, and retrieved his pack. Back with Hedwig, he thought for a long minute, then began to write.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for your letter. It really made my day. I miss you more than you can possibly imagine, and in more ways than are even right. *I'm fine. Freezing my arse off, but fine. Yes, I'm eating enough. Yes, everybody wants to kill each other, but I think the urge is wearing down a little. I get to share a tent with the snarky git, and the other two have their own. Sharing a tent with him is a ludicrous contrast to sharing with you. Thank the gods you don't snore.*

Sorry to hear about R and his nightly disturbances. Also sorry to hear about R and H and their no-doubt ceaseless desires to snog in front of you. Or not in front of you. It really doesn't matter. I really don't need to think about that any more, though.

Your assignment sounds boring as hell. So far, ours is, too. I'm gaining a lovely familiarity with the area, though, and the scenery is really quite nice. Pity S can't cook to save his life, but F may be improving in that regard.

Nine days is far too long to be healthy. I don't know if I can make it.

"Malfoy," George called, interrupting his stream of thoughts, "tell our git of a brother and Harry and Hermione that we said hello."

"Sure." George disappeared again, and Draco resumed writing.

G & F send their greetings to you and the other two. Anyway, I'll see you in nine if I don't hear from you before. Take care of yourself and try not to act like a Gryffindor for once in your life. I love you, too.

Draco.

He folded the parchment the same way Harry had and offered it dubiously to Hedwig. "Are you keeping that under your wing or something?" Draco asked, feeling uncertain. "You're not going to lose it, are you - ow!" She had bitten him, after taking the letter. Her head disappeared again, then returned to its usual position, looking very cross. Clicking her beak, Hedwig flapped her wings several times, not taking off, showing Draco the seemingly empty place under said wing.

He shook his head. "I don't know how you do it, then," he said. "You're magical." Draco smiled fondly and Hedwig allowed him to stroke her head again.

She turned and began to hop back down the slope. When she was quite a distance away, she began to fly, swooping low over the loch in the distance and cruising along the water. When she was out of sight, Draco got up and returned to the others.

* * *

"Malfoy, give me your hand."

"No. I'm fine." Draco clung stubbornly to the side of the precipice.

Fred squatted down, narrowing his eyes meanly. "Would you like Harry to see you like this and know you refused to be helped?"

Draco glared at him. That was below the belt. Still glaring, his thrust his wrist out and allowed Fred to take it. Fred hauled him bodily over the edge of the rocky ledge and helped him sit down. "I wouldn't have fallen," Draco said, glowering. "Snape's spell would have held. Speaking of whom, actually - " he turned back toward the edge. "How are you doing?" he asked Snape.

"Oh, just splendid," Snape said, speaking to the cliff face.

"Want a hand?"

"Please."

Snape must have been dizzy or something; normally he never admitted that he required or wanted help. Draco knelt and instructed Fred to hold his ankles (he was lighter than Snape, whereas Fred was considerably heavier than he was and wouldn't have needed the bloody anchoring), and held out a hand to Snape. Snape silently seized his wrist and pulled himself up and over the edge. "Thank you," he said curtly, and got to his feet. George was playing with a bit of fire, apparently trying to decide how best to render soup or stew today, and Snape joined him in the effort.

It was Day Number Only-Three-More-Until-Saturday, and they were all getting along decidedly better. Not that they'd found anything, nothing at all - but that made sense, too, Draco figured. If Voldemort was in Perth, then the rest of the Death Eaters were probably somewhere nearby. They were way too far North to find anything. Still. No good getting complacent.

"So," Fred said, looking at Draco. "That worked. I wasn't really expecting it to."

"What worked?" Draco asked vaguely, still staring off in the direction of George and Snape, who were now arguing peaceably.

"The Harry thing," Fred reminded him. "Guilting you into letting me help you there." He nodded toward the edge of the cliff - which had been a short-ish cliff and not a particularly difficult climb, but would have been nasty to fall from nonetheless.

Draco felt his cheeks warm. "So what?" He didn't try to keep the edge from his voice.

Fred gave him an odd sort of smile. "Pretty serious with you two then, is it?"

Draco glanced at the other. Fred seemed perfectly relaxed, his face open (or as open as it ever

got; those two were *devious*) and friendly. "Yeah," he said. "It's pretty serious."

"You, er, in love?" Fred asked casually.

Draco's cheeks warmed still more, but he kept his composure cool. "Yes. Very much so, in fact. Why?"

He shot this at Fred with a little less warmth than he might normally have used in speaking to him. Fred shrugged. "Just asking, mate. No need to get riled. I'm just curious. I don't think I've ever really had feelings that strong for someone. Well, a girl, I guess is what I mean."

Draco cracked a humourless smile. "Maybe you should try the other."

"No, I'm straight," Fred said in all seriousness. "It's just - I think it has something to do with being a twin, you know? I've never really needed someone else. Or rather, I already *have* someone else. Why would I get all excited about finding a companion for life? I have George."

Draco snickered. "Please don't tell me that George, uh, takes care of all of your more basic urges, too."

Fred made a face and threw a bit of grass at Draco. "Git. I should beat you for even suggesting it. No, of course not. But casual sex is something else."

"You don't - well - ever want the whole deal, all together?" Draco asked lightly. "You know, the life's companion bit *and* the sex?"

Fred made a non-committal noise. "Doesn't really matter," he said. "Not something I've given much thought too. I should ask George if he thinks about it. I don't think he does. But - that's what you feel like you and Harry've got?"

"More or less," Draco said. It felt strange to talk about it, somehow.

"So, it's not just sex or experimentation, then," Fred said, watching him very closely.

Draco scowled. "What do you take me for? I wouldn't play with him that way."

"That's not what I implied," Fred replied calmly. "It could've been experimentation on his part, too. For all I knew, it could have run its course over the summer and faded during these two weeks."

Draco was quiet for a moment. He plucked single blade of grass and ran his thumbnail through it, splitting it down the center. "We promised each other that nothing would change," he said, barely audibly.

Fred shifted a bit. "How many letters has he written you since the first?"

"Two more since then," Draco said. "They take a while to find me."

"I'm sure," Fred said. "And you write back?"

"Of course," Draco said. He gave Fred a hard stare. "Why?"

"Just curious," Fred said. He got to his feet and held his hand out to Draco. "Sounds like you've got something good there, mate. Don't blow it."

Draco frowned as he let Fred pull him up. "Why would I do that?"

"I didn't mean anything by it," Fred said, surprised. "Just saying. If it means a lot to you, just make sure you're careful with it."

"I will," Draco said, still a little confused by Fred's uncharacteristic seriousness. *Of course I will.*

* * *

It was Saturday, and it was time to Apparate to Grimmauld Place. Draco was so excited that he could hardly bear it. Every little thing made him snap; his impatience was stretched to its limits.

Snape snapped right back, but Draco almost wondered if there was something half-amused, or half-tolerating in his sharp tones.

It was late afternoon now, and Snape wouldn't tell him exactly when they were due back at Grimmauld Place. Draco and the twins had all forgotten what time Dumbledore had said, if he had actually ever given one. Draco glanced at the twins before making his way over to Snape. "Is it time yet?" he asked, his voice low and tense.

Snape looked at him. They were about the same height, though Draco felt that he'd always feel that he had to look up meet Snape's eye. The older wizard gave him a long, impassive look, then finally said, "I suppose we can go now. Get the other two."

He generally avoided using their names if at all possible. Draco swallowed and tried to act nonchalant, walking over to the twins. "Hey," he said. "Snape says we can go now."

George's face brightened. "Back to Grimmauld Place?"

"Yeah. You two ready?"

"More than," Fred said, and beckoned to Snape. Snape sighed and gave in, walking over. At his word, they Apparated.

* * *

Grimmauld Place was, in a word, a dump. Or at least it looked like one from the outside. Draco stared at the heap of bricks that had apparently once been the Noble House of Black, or whatever they called it, as Snape employed the knocker. The bell was seemingly non-functional or something.

Lupin answered the door. He looked startled to see Snape, but regained his composure after a moment. "Come in, come in," he said hastily, standing clear of the door. "They're just debriefing some of the other students who got here before you."

He led the way through a darkened hallway into a wider foyer. Seeming uncertain, he turned to Snape. "I… don't know whether you'd prefer to get settled in your rooms, or if - er - you'd rather

go join the meeting…?" Lupin trailed off, looking at Snape for guidance.

Snape cast a look over Draco and the twins. "Rooms first, I think. Just a quick stop for me. I need to see Albus."

Lupin nodded quickly. "Of course. I'll you just - "

He broke off as there were footsteps approaching. A door leading off the foyer opened, and Granger's surprised face appeared in the gap. "Oh! You're back!" she said, looking at all of them. She took a step further and opened her mouth to speak again, but Draco cut her off.

"Hello, Granger. Where's Harry?" He knew he probably sounded rude, and couldn't really care less.

Granger stopped, looking slightly miffed, but nodded her head back toward the room from which she'd just emerged. "In there, talking to Professor Dumbledore. I don't think he can - "

Again, she was cut off. A familiar-looking hand appeared, wrenching the door open. "Draco!" Harry exclaimed, and pushed past Granger. His face was an odd combination of delighted, angry and somehow tense as he seized Draco by the arms. Before he could say or do anything, Dumbledore also appeared through the door.

"Harry, get back in here at *once*," he said firmly, looking seriously pissed off. "You do not just walk out of proceedings of this nature like that."

Harry's eyes met Draco's for a long moment. Draco's lip twisted and he managed a half-smirk. "Hello," he said, and it came out sounding almost amused. His hands had gotten onto Harry's elbows, and he realized how much it looked like they were embracing already. He didn't care. Not about these little people and their little rules. All he wanted was Harry.

Harry closed his eyes as though in a plea for patience. "Hello," he said, opening them again. "I just wanted to say hi."

"I asked Ms. Granger to see who was at the door, *not* you, specifically because I didn't want - "

"I'll be right *there*," Harry said sharply, cutting Dumbledore off, not taking his eyes off Draco. "Just a second."

Dumbledore heaved a long sigh, then looked addressed Snape. "Hello, Severus. How are you?"

"Stiff and cold," Draco heard Snape reply, but he wasn't listening. Lupin was probably still watching them, not to mention Fred, George and Granger, but he didn't care.

"How are you?" he asked Harry, feeling like he didn't know exactly what to say. What he *wanted* to say was something along the lines of "holy fucking hell, have I missed you, and do you still love me, and when can we shag?", but that didn't seem quite right for an opener.

Harry grinned, looking somewhat hysterical. "How *am* I? What kind of a question is that?! Fucking *hell*, I've missed you!"

Draco laughed, louder than he'd meant to, and grabbed Harry's face, kissing him fiercely. One or both of the twins whistled and he continued to ignore them. Harry's hands had moved from Draco's elbows to his waist. They kissed again, and then Harry pulled him into a ferociously tight hug. "I've missed you, too," Draco muttered, trying not to be overheard. Also wishing he knew how to convey just how much, but aware that this was neither the time nor the place.

Harry released him reluctantly. "I have to go back to my meeting," he said. "I'll make it as short as humanly possible, and then I'm coming to find you. Go unpack or something."

"Where am I staying?" Draco lowered his voice. "I take it they didn't put us in the same room."

"They didn't, but don't worry," Harry assured him. "Get the twins to show you where mine and Ron's room is. He's going to stay with Hermione, but don't tell Mrs. Weasley."

Strongly doubting that he'd be talking to Molly Weasley even in passing, Draco shrugged. "Sure."

"Harry - " Dumbledore's voice was warning.

Harry rolled his eyes at Draco, his back to the old man. "See you later."

"Yeah." Draco nodded. Snape, Lupin and Granger followed, not even sparing a backward glance for Draco and the twins."

"Come on," Fred said. "We've stayed here loads. I don't know where you're supposed to be sleeping, but I assume you want to know where Harry's room is."

"Strange that Lupin didn't offer to show you," George said, frowning.

"He probably, uh, overheard Harry and I," Draco said, looking apprehensively at the hideously ugly display of house elf heads mounted to the wall beside the staircase. What a terrible house. No wonder the Black line had ended so ignominiously. He wondered who the house belonged to now. Perhaps Dumbledore had simply assumed possession of it or something. Harry had told him that it was the Order's headquarters before Black had gone through the veil, too.

Fred snickered at Draco's comment and started up the stairs. "Come on, then."

The room was fairly big, though draughty. Weasley's things were still in there, but hadn't been unpacked. Harry's things, instantly recognizable, were all over one of the beds. Draco stopped in his tracks, the smile freezing on his face. There were *beds*.

George caught his expression. "I know," he said, following Draco's gaze, grinning. "Beds. I can't remember the last time I slept in one of those."

"Sure you do," Fred cut in. "It was the last night of June, in our flat in Diagon Alley. Oh, how I miss our flat! Do you suppose the rats have taken over by now?"

"Quite," George agreed mournfully. "Well, we'll leave you to it, then," he said to Draco, with a vague gesture toward Harry's bed. He trailed out of the room behind his twin, who was talking about bugs or something now. At the door, though, George stopped. "Wait, I'll just take this lot with me," he said, his eye falling on his younger brother's things. "Drop in Hermione's room. You don't want to shag with *Ron's* stuff right in front of you, now do you?"

Without waiting for a reply, George disappeared, closing the door behind himself. Amused, Draco pulled his shrunken pack from his pocket, enlarged it and emptied its contents on Weasley's bed. Considering, he glanced at Harry's stuff. Either Harry was letting his clothes air or something, but they were wrinkled and probably in as much need of several laundering spells as Draco's own. Draco moved them all to Weasley's bed by his own and cleaned them. It took all of twenty seconds or so to do the lot.

Though his eye kept straying back to the bed, which was tempting him to go and lie down on it and never get up again, Draco prowled about the room first. If he even *tested* the bed now, he'd probably fall asleep, and he didn't want to do that. Instead, he stripped the clothes he was wearing off and cleaned them, too, putting only his boxers and jeans back on after. They were Harry's favourites of his collection, incidentally - the black silk ones with the silver Snitches that flapped their wings.

The bed was now clear. It couldn't hurt just to sit down on it. Draco sat gingerly on the edge, and the temptation to curl up and go to sleep intensified noticeably. He ignored it and examined his feet, which hadn't been bare for any prolonged period for a long time. A few simple grooming spells later, Draco felt much happier about the world than he had in a long time. Suddenly, another appealing thought occurred to him. He shot to his feet and went to the door, looking around. Sure enough, there was a bathroom directly across the hall. A bathroom! Which was clean! And had a shower! Draco could have danced a jig on the spot. He successfully resisted the urge.

Going back into the bedroom, he closed the door. What else could he do until Harry got there? Draco paced. There were no paintings on the walls, not a single one. The wallpaper was black and peeling in places. It didn't matter. It would be just fine. And it had a bed, a real, wonderfully soft/firm bed. Draco went to the dresser, the only other piece of furniture in the room besides the two twin beds and a wooden chair in the corner, and had a look. Gloating when he discovered what he'd been looking for: candles. Draco didn't give a damn how common candles were in the wizarding world; he still thought they were romantic. Plus, he'd become a bit of a pyromaniac over the past two weeks. He lit several, setting them in twisted, wrought iron sconces.

Lighting one over the old dresser, Draco caught a glimpse of himself in the wavy mirror and bent to inspect his reflection. His hair was a disaster. He fixed it at once and examined his face. At least it didn't look as dirty as it felt. Draco performed his showering/cleaning spell and it was marginally better. His face looked older, he thought. More adult. The hollows of his cheekbones were slightly more pronounced, but somehow his face had lost some of its pointier angles and gained other ones; interesting new planes and creases and indentations. With a slight shock, he realized that some of them had probably come from smiling more. Harry had actually left his mark on him, in a more lasting and profound way than any amount of biting on Draco's part. Draco smiled at himself in the mirror and touched one of the lines near his mouth.

The door opened and closed. Draco spun around. Harry was standing there, grinning and apologizing all at once. "I'm sorry I'm so late, Dumbledore just wouldn't shut *up*, and gods, I'm going to stop talking about him right *now* - "

"Good," Draco said, and launched himself across the room. Harry was laughing and caught him and they were kissing again, and really, nothing had changed. Draco could feel it, and his relief could have floated all of Europe. And it felt so *good*, just to do this again. Be with Harry.

"Gods, you look hot without your shirt on," Harry said, inspecting him. "And barefoot, too - my, what a wanton you've become!"

"You've made me this way, Potter. Get out of those clothes at once."

Harry grinned and removed his shirt in what might have been record time. "Two *weeks*, Draco - I can't believe we had to go that long - "

"Don't talk about it," Draco ordered. "I'll make it up to you."

"We'll make it up to each other," Harry corrected, going for the button of Draco's jeans. "Mmm, you're hard," he observed, his tongue coming out to wet his lips.

"Like I said. It's all your fault." Draco unzipped Harry's jeans and hauled them down his lover's legs. Harry stepped out of them and kicked them aside.

"Dirty anyway," he commented.

"I cleaned the rest of your clothes."

"Did you? Thanks!"

"And guess what? There are clean showers here!" Draco said, still too excited to even try to be blasé about the fact. "We have to have a shower later."

"Together?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, together," Draco said, drawing Harry close, now that their clothes were no longer a barrier.

Harry glanced around the room. "It's not the most romantic setting for our first shag in two weeks," he said. "Though I see you've lit candles. Very nice." He smirked, but there was a definite softness in his eyes.

"I really couldn't care less about the décor," Draco said. "I just want you." It was almost embarrassing how true that was.

"You've got me," Harry said, smiling.

Draco recognized his own words and smiled back. "You top," he said, taking Harry's hand and pulling him back toward the bed.

Harry let himself be drawn in first, his mouth so warm against Draco's. How had he lived without this for two weeks? Draco sat down, then lay back, bringing Harry with him. Harry lifted his mouth off briefly. "Lube," he said.

"Oh - right - it's in my pack, can you summon it?"

"*Accio* lube," Harry said, his tone very commanding. It worked; the lube sailed toward him. Harry grinned and put it to use. "That's so handy."

"Shut up and kiss me, oh smug one," Draco said, smiling back nonetheless.

Harry did as he was told, aligning his warm, nude chest with Draco's, settling himself between Draco's thighs. Their mouths came together, slowly, warmly, brilliantly - Harry's fingers slipped in gently, one at a time, stretching him again. It was tighter than it had been, and the notion that sex might be a little painful again was almost ludicrously intriguing this time. Draco arched against Harry's fingers, pushing back. "Now," he breathed.

Harry's breath slipped out between his teeth. "I forgot - no Silencing spell," he said, his breathing shallow already.

"Then we'll just have to be quiet," Draco said. "There's no way in hell I'm stopping *now*."

Harry laughed, and his laugh become a moan. "Me neither." He pulled his fingers out and very gently pushed his cock into Draco's body. Gods, it was tight. Draco's breath caught, but he placed both of his hands on Harry's arse and continued pulling his lover into him. Harry groaned, very softly. "Draco… "

Draco arched up even further, his hips meeting Harry's as Harry embedded himself completely. He could hardly breathe. The pain was as intense as the pleasure of having Harry this close to him again, and it wasn't as though his erection had flagged any. "… Harry… gods - "

Harry bit his own lip, his eyes narrowing as though in pain, and exhaled loudly through his nose. It looked as though keeping himself quiet was very difficult. Draco was on the verge of pointing this out and smirking when Harry shifted his hips slightly, watching Draco's face.

The sensation was almost overwhelming, and Draco was hard put not to come right then and there. "Gods, Harry - don't - I'll come - "

Harry grinned, his lip still caught in his teeth, and went back to moving gently in and out, in a steady rhythm that was both sensual and strangely comforting. He'd been broken without Harry, and now he was one again. They were one again. Draco moaned very softly and pulled Harry's face down by the back of his neck.

Their mouths were moving very softly together. Harry's hips picked up the pace and began to slowly deliver more warming pleasure - never hitting that sensitive place exactly, but all around it, and Draco was about to come, anyway. Harry opened his eyes suddenly. Draco felt Harry's lashes sweep against his cheeks and opened his own eyes. It was intense. Harry's face was too close to focus on, their tongues still rubbing against each other's. Draco was drowning in the green, in Harry's nearness, and some sort of explosion went off in his brain. At the same time, Harry's hand closed around his cock and pulled just once. Draco came spectacularly, bucking up against Harry and fighting not to bite down on his lover's tongue. He wrested his eyes back open and returned Harry's intense stare, sucking hard on his tongue, and felt Harry's release flood into him. Harry's breaths shuddered out of him and blood was pounding against Draco's eardrums.

"… love you… " Harry gasped, and let his weight fall onto Draco entirely.

In answer, Draco brought their faces together again, kissed hard. Somewhere in there, Harry tugged the blankets out from under Draco and managed to get them over the two of them. They were both asleep within minutes.

* * *

They didn't wake up until George came knocking. "Harry? Malfoy?" his voice came, filtering through the heavy door and into their sleep. "It's George. If you're naked in there, cover up, because I'm coming in."

Harry's eyes flew open. "Wait!"

Draco chuckled sleepily. "I'm not getting up. I love this bed. I'm never, ever leaving it again."

"Are you decent?" George continued. "You've got five seconds, and then I'm in there with you. You'd better not be doing something gross when I come in, either. One, two, three, four, five."

Harry had still been lying half on top of Draco and rolled off quickly, pulling the blankets around them tightly, as high as possible. The door opened and George walked in, closing it after him. He took one look at them and snorted. "No surprise there," he said. "Post-shag nap, from the looks of it. You've got to get up, the rest of the students are here, and there's dinner and a meeting."

Draco mumbled something unintelligible, and heard Harry say, "Sorry, but Draco's got a lifelong appointment with this bed. We can't make it."

Draco's stomach chose that moment in which to rumble loudly. Harry giggled and elbowed him. "Traitor," Harry accused.

George laughed. "Yeah, he did seem pretty taken with it when we brought him up here. However, unless my senses deceive me, you two are hungry, and you've already scratched one

itch, so why not play nice and come downstairs?"

Draco opened his eyes. "I suppose Dumbledore will come up here if we don't," he said, although he'd never really been considering *not* going down. He was starving.

George grinned and went to the door. "Could be worse," he said. "Could be my mum. See you in ten or so." The door closed behind him.

Harry turned over and looked down at Draco. "I'm hungry," he admitted.

"I'm starving. I guess we have to go play the game. We'll postpone the shower until later." Draco sighed. "What time is it? How long did we sleep?"

Harry got out of bed and fetched his wand. "Past seven, actually. I don't really know how long we were sleeping. Maybe an hour?"

"Hmm." Draco got out of bed, too, and went to his pile of freshly cleaned clothes. *Which DA t-shirt to wear this time?* He selected a black one, the least tatty of the three, and pulled it on. Pulling on his jeans, he heard Harry giggle. "What?"

He looked, and Harry was wearing a black DA t-shirt, too. "We match," he said gleefully.

Draco rolled his eyes. "You are such a git."

"I know, but you love me, don't you?"

Draco's smile grew fond. "Yeah." He pulled Harry to him by means of the back of his neck and kissed him sweetly. "Love you."

"I never would have dreamed," Harry told him, looking blissful, "that the Draco Malfoy I grew up with would *ever* have said such a thing, in all seriousness."

"Yeah, well, things change, don't they?" Draco asked rhetorically.

"You regret any of it?" Harry asked. His tone was light, but slightly distant, as though shielding himself from the possibilities of Draco's answer.

Draco shoved him lightly. "What, missing my chance to enrol in Death Eater camp and train up in Potter-killing? No thanks. This is just ever so slightly better."

Harry looked uncomfortable. "I know you don't like how Dumbledore's doing things, and I don't either, but… "

"Not the war, stupid, *you*," Draco said, with a firmer push.

Harry grinned and caught his hand, pulling him in again. After they kissed again, several times, Harry said, his lips still somewhat mashed against Draco's, "I guess we'd better go."

"Sure, but you'd best put some trousers on first," Draco said, his eyes half-closed. "Imagine what Molly Weasley would say."

"Or Snape."

Harry finished dressing, and they went downstairs, laughing like the children they weren't any more.

A/N: Tell me what you thought! :)

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Chapter: 26

Chapter 26: A Weekend's Respite

Feeling pleasantly fuller than he had for awhile, Draco followed Harry to the library doors where the meeting was. Harry stopped just before going in, though, and turned back to him, his face unusually serious. "I should probably tell you," he said, with a bit of a grimace, "that Dumbledore and I aren't really getting along very well. If he's really jerky to you, that's probably because of me."

Draco looked at him. "Is it any worse than it was before?" he asked, thinking it a rhetorical question.

"A fair bit, actually," Harry said. "It's pretty bad."

"What happened?"

"I'll tell you about it later, okay? We should probably get in there." Harry watched his reaction.

Draco shrugged. "Okay, but I want a full story."

"You'll get it. Come on." Harry pushed the heavy door open and went in. It looked like most of the camp was there, indeed. The house must have been larger than it looked from the outside, Draco realized. He'd only even seen Harry's room on the second floor, the basement kitchen, the dining room, and now the library, which appeared to be in a wing toward the back, on the fourth floor. They'd had to go down stairs and then up again to get to it, surrounded by the Black clan's creepy sense of decor. At least the Manor had been nice. No wonder his mother had always spoken the way she had about the Blacks.

They sat down in the last two available seats - which were, thankfully, together. Draco found himself between Harry on his right and Ernie Macmillan on his left. Macmillan gave him an odd look, and shifted his chair away ever so slightly. Draco suddenly recalled his and Harry's rather obvious display of relationship-ness right before leaving. Come to think of it, people *had* been giving them odd looks throughout dinner. It had only just now clicked in to Draco's perceptions.

It didn't matter. It never had. He'd only kept quiet about being gay back at Hogwarts because he didn't particularly want to be in the center of attention. Not that way, at least. And if Lucius had heard, there would have been hell to pay. But as it stood - it didn't matter. If Harry was okay with it, then Draco wasn't going to gripe about it. Besides, Harry had been the one to instigate that bit of public-ness. Hopefully he wouldn't be struck by coming-out repressiveness and remorse

belatedly, once *he'd* noticed how people were reacting.

Harry leaned over slightly. Despite the fact that approximately fifty-eight pairs of eyes followed his movement, he whispered, "Everyone's staring at us. I guess that's my fault, too. Sorry."

Draco moved the back of his hand so that it was touching the back of Harry's. "It's alright. I don't care. Do you?"

A slight pause. "No," Harry whispered, sounding slightly defiant.

Draco turned his head and lifted his eyebrows coolly. "You sure about that?"

Harry smiled at him, a smile that, if they'd been alone, would have meant trouble. Or fun. And witnessed by a large group of people, could only be taken as the smile of one lover to another. "Quite," he said, his voice just above a whisper now. "Don't make me prove it here."

Draco relaxed, put his eyebrows back down, and smiled back, nicely. "It's tempting."

"Want me to say something?"

"It doesn't matter. Don't."

Dumbledore unbent his head from where it had been angled toward Shacklebolt's, and cleared his throat. "Thank you for coming," he said. "And do allow me to congratulate you all on your successful first assignments. Between myself and the rest of the staff, we have collected reports and debriefings from every group now, and I thank you for that, as well. Now, as you may have deduced, these assignments were more or less test-run assignments for the type of work which you will be continuing after this weekend. Monday morning, you will begin your second tasks. These will be given to you individually sometime between this evening, following the meeting, and tomorrow afternoon. We will *not* be accepting requests for new partner assignments," Dumbledore added, his eyes cutting to Harry and going temporarily hard. "As I have said before, these groups have been designed with very specific purposes in mind, and your first tasks have proved that we chose well."

He droned on and on, and Draco stared at the lined, old face and wondered how different the old

man really was from Voldemort, after all. Okay, strike that - he was no Dark lord. He truly loved people and wanted to see the best thing done. But it was all just so frustrating - between himself and Voldemort, they'd exhausted one generation's war and had to carry it over, putting all the burden on a single person and the only person who understood the way Voldemort worked well enough to run the war on his behalf. Oh, Draco understood that - it was Harry's war, after all. Or had to be. Not his conflict, but it was still his war. And he was going to have to, with Dumbledore's help, find a way to end it. But how much would it really hurt to let Harry work with whom he wanted?

When the meeting dismissed, he busied himself with talking to Krum while Harry chatted with the twins, the tautness and tension in his face not ever clearing entirely. Eventually, Draco went and gave him a firm nudge in the direction of the door. Harry excused himself, and they found their way back to the bedroom. Draco closed the door behind them. "What is going on?" he asked at once. "Explain why it's so much worse now."

Harry heaved a great sigh and went to sit on Weasley's bed. "It's all just so fucked-up," he said, unhelpfully.

Draco watched him rake fingers through his hair and waited silently for Harry to continue. Harry pulled off his glasses and rubbed them absent-mindedly on his t-shirt.

"I had an argument with Dumbledore this afternoon, when we got back," he said. "Well, wait. I should back up. I saw Dumbledore early last week, and I was pretty pissy. He came to check up on us, see how we were doing, since he's sort of supervising our group. I think he asked me how I was doing, or something, and I kind of just said I didn't want to talk about it. It was on Wednesday, I think. I was still feeling horrible, missing you. I mean, I missed you the whole time, but - I was having trouble sleeping and stuff, and I just wasn't in a really great mood in the first place. Dumbledore just got all withdrawn and went away. He didn't check back again until today, when we got back. Hermione said I hurt his feelings. I might have hurt hers, too - I told her to stay out of it."

Harry sighed again and banished his glasses to the table by his own bed. Draco stopped leaning against the door and went to lie there, on his side, facing Harry across the short distance between the two beds. "So, what happened today?"

Harry looked at Weasley's bed as though contemplating lying down himself, but their clothes were still spread out over it. "Get up for a second," he said.

Draco suppressed a sigh and got to his feet. "What are you doing?"

Harry grinned suddenly. "No spells not allowed *here*," he said gleefully. He enlarged the twin bed to over twice its size. "How do you like that?"

Draco looked at it. "Very much, actually," he said. He pulled off the socks he'd put on for dinner and the meeting and tossed them toward his pack before climbing back onto the bed. "Coming?"

"Yeah." Harry took his socks off, too, and joined Draco on the bed. "So, today, we got back, and he was just being really brief. Then he found out that I made this mistake in one of the decodings. Hermione had caught it and fixed it, so there was no harm done. But he got mad and dragged me over the coals for not paying attention to what I was doing and shirking my duty as one of the trainees and all that. So, I got mad back and said that I *had* been paying attention. It was an Arithmancy problem, and I never even *took* Arithmancy at Hogwarts. Like I said in one of my letters, the stuff we're doing is totally more Hermione's thing than mine or Ron's. We just try to help her, pretty much. Anyway, then I said that even if I hadn't been paying attention, that's still his fault and that I'd wanted to be teamed with you and he knew it. He said that he knew all along that Kingsley and them were right about forbidding relationships during the training and that this just proved that I wasn't capable of handling both my emotions and my responsibilities."

Draco cursed softly, under his breath, but Harry went on. "I know. Ron spoke up then and said that he and Hermione had started dating in summer, too, and that they weren't being distracted by working together, unless Dumbledore counted the mistakes he'd made, too. He pointed out that if Dumbledore was going to chalk my mistake up to being distracted because I wasn't with you, then he couldn't say that Ron's mistakes were because he *was* with the person he's dating."

Draco was slightly impressed despite himself. He'd wondered if anyone was ever going to twig in to the unfairness of letting Granger and Weasley date fairly openly and work together, but not Harry and himself. And Weasley actually speaking up and defending Harry - that was a purely Gryffindor trait. Slytherins rarely engaged in displays of defensive loyalty. "What did Dumbledore say to that?"

Harry shook his head. "He basically told Ron to stay out of it and that it hadn't anything to do with him. Ron said that it did, because I'm his best friend and I was miserable. I think he was maybe a bit hurt that I'd said I didn't want to be working with them right in front of them, but he knows it's true. And he's a good friend. He wants me to be happy. Dumbledore just said that the working arrangements were final and that he didn't want to be bothered with all of it again. I suppose I was pretty angry by then. I asked him if it was punishment for the demerits I got during training camp for oversleeping, or something, and that's when all hell broke out.

Dumbledore went off about how he was attempting to run a war, not cater to the whims of lovesick schoolboys and the like, and that's about when you arrived."

"Ah." Draco understood now, the tension and Dumbledore's incredible pettiness over Harry having left the meeting at this juncture. "So, what happened when you went back in?"

Harry gave him a guilty smile. "He was about to rip me to shreds, but I tore into him, first. Seeing you gave me new energy, I guess. I said there was no need for him to be that manipulative, whether it was for the war's sake or otherwise. I'm pretty sure I hurt his feelings, but he's just being stubborn as a rock about it all."

Draco reached over, but stopped just shy of touching Harry. "Do you think it's because he doesn't really trust me?" he asked quietly.

Harry's eyes widened. "What?!"

"It could be," Draco said, not quite meeting Harry's eye. "That could be why he doesn't want you off with me. Maybe he wants me somewhere where Snape can keep an eye on what I'm doing, rather than risking you. And you can't be with Snape and me both, because we're off trying to find Death Eaters, apparently - though you'd never know, from where they sent us this *last* assignment - and the whole point is to find them before they find you. It would be too risky to have you with us. And I can't be with you, even supervised, because Snape needs a back-up."

Harry digested this for a moment. "The whole trust issue aside, why couldn't the twins go with Snape? You could come with us, instead, and maybe a staff person could come, too, if they really thought you'd attack me with Ron and Hermione both there?"

Draco shook his head. "First, if I was really evil, I could still manage to kill you even *with* staff there. There are lots of ways it could happen. I could be on watch, and kill you in your sleep. *You* could be on watch, and I could get up in the night. They know I know about your invisibility cloak. I could steal it and vanish off to Voldemort's side. Secondly, Snape would kill the twins without me there to intercede. And if I ditched him, *he'd* be really hurt. I don't know. I don't know what to do about all of this. Because it actually does make sense to have me where I am, I guess. I can see that. And it makes sense that you not be there, with me. What doesn't make sense is that you're doing what you're doing - which is basically something than even Longbottom could do. I don't understand why they couldn't have found us something to do together."

Harry looked incredibly frustrated, his brow puckered in thought. He slid over a bit then, closer to Draco, and ran a finger down over his chest, warm even through the worn cotton. "I want to spy with you," he said quietly. "There are lots of ways I could do it. I want to come with you and Snape."

Draco's throat tightened. "Snape would never allow it," he said, his hand coming up to grip Harry's to his chest. "He'd send you back as soon as he realized."

"I wouldn't go."

"He'd take you himself, then. You know him. And you'd miss Granger and Weasley, off on the new assignment, and end up playing housekeeper here with Lupin for the rest of the war. I guess you should consider yourself lucky that Dumbledore's even letting you out into the field at all." It was hard to get the words out, but the painful truth had to be told. No pretenses between them. Draco's eyes flicked up and found Harry's.

Harry closed his eyes. "I know," he said, his voice tight.

Draco gripped his hand harder. "We'll just have to take it as extra incentive to keep ourselves alive," he said. "For the weekends."

Harry curled himself into a ball, his face against Draco's chest. "We have no idea how long the next assignments will be. We might never get breaks at the same time again."

The warmth of his face felt good against Draco's chest and neck. He rested his chin on Harry's head and said, "You'll just have to pressure Dumbledore and the rest into getting you a chance at Voldemort sooner rather than later, then. So we can end this bloody thing. It's just that I wanted to be there with you, when it happens."

Harry pulled away, surprised. "You did?" he asked, his tone changing to one of surprise.

Draco frowned. "Yes. Of course I do."

Harry looked ridiculously pleased by this. "I didn't know that."

"Well, that's because you're a git," Draco told him loftily, trying to feel less…exposed by what he'd just said. "Why wouldn't I want to be there when you meet your mighty destiny at last?" The last came out a little more sarcastically than he'd intended, but that was just the way things went, sometimes.

Harry smiled. "I wanted you to be there, too," he said. "Maybe by then, things will be different."

"We have no idea when that 'when' is," Draco pointed out.

"True," Harry said. He sighed, then yawned. "What time is it?"

Draco pulled out his wand and cast a *tempus*. "We need a clock in this room. It's past eleven."

"You still up for a shower?" Harry asked hopefully. "I know it's late, but we can sleep in tomorrow. I'm longing for a shower. I haven't felt truly clean since Hogwarts."

"Me neither," Draco said. Some of his fatigue had vanished at the very idea. A shower. With Harry. "Sounds good," he decided, and got up.

* * *

The hot water was pure bliss. Draco felt like he could happily spend a week or two just alternating between sleeping in that nice, soft bed and having showers. And sex.

"Draco," Harry whined, "you're hogging the water… "

Draco didn't open his eyes as he smiled. "You're whining, dear," he said, blissfully content.

Harry grabbed him and swung him out of the way. Having had his eyes still closed, it caught Draco by surprise and he would have fallen if Harry hadn't been holding onto his arms. As it was, he ended up staggering into Harry. Ah, there - they were both more or less under the stream now, and Harry was kissing him hotly, the water getting into their mouths and eyes and it was exquisite. The pure sensuousness of the water had taken its toll, and Draco was hard as a rock.

Harry's hands were on him, slippery with some sort of rose-scented body wash they'd discovered in one of the cupboards (Lupin's doing?). Draco's fingers mingled with Harry's on his own cock, slid over to Harry's, which was nudging against him. They kissed and stroked and moaned soft, steaming breaths into the almost-nonexistent space between them. It was one of the gentlest, loveliest orgasms Draco had ever had, when he came. Harry came a moment later, panting, his eyes squeezed shut, his lips parted. That lower lip, swollen and red, caught Draco's eye again, and he latched on, sucking for all he was worth.

"… love you, Draco, I love - " Harry was breathing, his breath fogging.

Draco slipped his arms around Harry and held him close, his own eyes closed now. It didn't matter how many times Harry felt like he needed to say it, and the heat of the moment didn't count, anyway. After a moment, he swung Harry around again, sighing as he felt the hot water hit the top of his head again. Beautiful. "Love you, too."

Harry opened his eyes. "You git!"

Draco smiled innocently. "What?"

"What do you mean, '*what*'? You stole the water again!"

Draco kissed his cheek. "Yes, but you love me anyway."

Harry paused. "True," he conceded.

"And you had it that whole time."

"Also true."

"Good boy." Draco grabbed Harry's chin and claimed his mouth again.

It was the best night he'd had in a long time.

* * *

Draco woke sometime around dawn, to his own surprise. Harry's chest was hot, almost feverish, beneath him, and Draco was somewhat dismayed to discover that he'd drooled on it a bit. He separated his cheek from Harry's flesh and wiped both parties. Better. Harry's breathing shifted a bit, but otherwise, he didn't move or show any signs of having noticed.

Why am I awake? Draco became aware that his back was cramping, but ignored it for the time being. He stared at Harry's peaceful-looking face for a long moment. Profoundly glad that they still had one more night together, Draco laid his head on his pillow and watched Harry from there. Maybe it wouldn't disappear on him if he just wished hard enough.

* * *

Later, he woke up again - it was perhaps seven or eight in the morning - and found that he'd turned on his side, facing away from Harry at some point. But Harry, still sleeping, had followed - his warmth cradled Draco from behind, his arm tight around Draco's torso. Draco could feel Harry's soft, warm breath on his back. He let his weight relax into Harry's and slept again.

* * *

"Are you awake?"

Harry's voice filtered through Draco's sleepy haze some time later. "Mmmm."

Harry laughed. "I see."

Draco smiled, his eyes still closed. "What do you see?"

Harry slipped his hand between Draco's legs, from behind, and his fingers were gently probing Draco balls in reply. He pressed a kiss onto Draco's shoulder blade. "You."

"Mmm," Draco said again, not opening his eyes but definitely waking up more. His cock was most of the way hard already, and probably had been before Harry had even touched him.

Harry, peering over his shoulder, caught the smile. "Like?"

"Mmm-hmm. Don't stop."

Harry laughed again. His hand continued its delicate massage, a knuckle occasionally brushing against Draco's erection. When he couldn't stand it any more, Draco turned onto his back. "*Gods*," he groaned. "Please don't stop."

Harry smiled endearingly. "I won't." He placed an open-mouthed kiss on each of Draco's nipples, and slowly kissed his way down. "I've missed morning sex almost more than anything."

"Me, too." Draco watched Harry's progress. The anticipation of where those kisses were going did nothing to detract from how good it felt. Harry had inched further down in the bed down, and was licking that pelvic line that led from his hip to his cock, his tongue firm and familiar, knowing its territory intimately. Draco's fingers found Harry's mop of hair and insinuated themselves into it.

Harry glanced up at him, his face unusually serious. "I missed doing this, too."

Draco smirked in reply, though the smirk was lacking something due to his neediness. "I've missed you doing it."

Harry pinched his thigh. "Git!"

"And I've missed doing it, too," Draco conceded.

He was rewarded with a warm smile, full of Harry's enthusiasm and sweetness, and then he was licking again, his tongue stroking Draco's balls, the underside of his cock… his fingers tightened in Harry's hair, and a sound escaped from the back of his throat. Harry's eyes narrowed, obviously delighted by this, and he continued, dragging his tongue over the nearly-twitching head of Draco's cock. It was so incredibly wonderful that Draco's thighs were trembling. One of Harry's hands was braced against his left thigh, and Draco was sure he could feel it. The next second, all rational thoughts fled his brain as Harry finally took pity on him and took Draco's length into his mouth. His lips and tongue worked furiously, not too fast, but fast enough. Draco

was panting and thrusting mindlessly into Harry's mouth, despite the restraining pressure of Harry's hands on his hips. Draco felt him swallow, and then Harry's face was right down at the base of his cock, nose in Draco's thatch of dark-blond fuzz.

He practically blacked out from the pleasure. It took him mere seconds to come after that, the feeling exploding out of his pores. It was honestly nearly more than Draco could bear. " - Gods - !" he gasped, when he could speak again.

Harry swallowed again and removed his mouth, wiping it. He was back up there, face-to-face with Draco a second later, moving like lightning. Draco was tasting himself in Harry's mouth, just a faintly bitter aftertaste lingering, being quickly swallowed in the singular sweetness of Harry's mouth, his familiar taste. "What - what do you want?" Draco managed to fit in there, somewhere.

Harry paused to think, lifting his face. "Anything," he said, his tone one of reckless abandon. "Can I - " his knee nudge Draco's further apart, and Draco understood immediately.

"Yes. Please!"

Harry's expression was something between a smile and a looked of pained, studied pleasure, as he asserted his cock into Draco's body. "I just topped last night," he said, breathless and sounding half-apologetic.

"I want you to," Draco said, arching up into it. "I do." His hands were on Harry's narrow waist, moving with his lover's movements.

"I just - I had to - I wanted it so much - "

"It's okay. Since when do we take turns religiously?"

"Draco - " it was almost a gasp, and Harry's mouth was back on his, hips meeting as their bodies came all the way together again. "I didn't - lube - "

Ah, no wonder it felt so much rougher. Draco groped for it blindly, found it and applied it himself; Harry pulled out enough to allow it. Draco smeared liberal amounts of it onto Harry's

cock, and when he sank in again, it was enough. Harry moaned and closed his eyes appreciatively. "I owe you."

"I'm sure you'll make it up to me." Draco smiled wickedly and pulled Harry's head down by means of a hand on the back of his lover's neck. "Harder."

Harry did as he was told, his hips moving in wide circles for a bit, until he'd found the place that made Draco's guts turn to liquid silver and caused his cock to harden again. Harry had obviously been waiting for that, though he needn't have, Draco thought, even as he appreciated the fact. His circles turned back to thrusts, strong and slow enough to bring Draco with him. It was a mercy, Draco reflected hazily, that he'd found himself someone who was both a competent as well as a considerate lover. Harry kissed him again, their tongues warring furiously. "Yeah?" Harry asked, his voice low and husky.

"Yeah," Draco breathed, the waves building within.

Harry's grip was warm on his still-wet erection and stroked it firmly. They came within seconds of each other; Harry shuddering and gasping and going boneless over Draco as his cock finished spurting within Draco, and Draco cursing aloud, his eyes closed, shooting come all over the both of them.

And it really was a wonderful thing, that the part that followed never got old. Draco never got tired of being so close to Harry, of feeling so intimately connected with him. Sure, he was sleepy, too, but some things were more important than sleeping. He didn't have the time to waste; he couldn't afford it.

Harry was looking rather sleepy, though. He pulled out of Draco after a few moments, and murmured spells to clean them both up (having retrieved his wand from the night table). Settling himself back into the bed, Harry gave him a dreamy smile that probably would have embarrassed him at any other time. "Thanks," he said. "Meant it when I said I owed you."

Draco put his fingers against Harry's lips, just liking how they felt to his touch. "I told you not to worry about it. I'm not complaining. That was amazing."

Harry smiled and sighed at the same time. "I just - I don't know, I always feel like I get more than I give in this relationship."

"Don't be ridiculous," Draco said shortly. "I could just as easily say the same thing."

"No you couldn't. You have to deal with me being who I am, and getting jealous over petty things. I just get to have you."

Harry looked very earnest, in a way that smacked rather too much of Gryffindor for Draco's liking. "No," he countered. "You're just as stuck with the fact that my father is a crazy Death Eater and trying to kill me. That's almost as bad. And the jealousy thing, we've dealt with. Right?"

Harry looked troubled. His hand came out and started drawing lazy patterns on Draco's chest. "I think so. But I'm stupidly happy that you're not going to see Zabini again, sick or not."

Draco took the hand from his chest and moved it to his lips. "Stop worrying so much."

Harry scooched over and kissed him for a long time. "The only thing left," he said, several minutes later, "is to find a way to prove that you're really on our side and not trying to kill me."

Draco shook his head. "Harry, listen. They're not going to listen to us. Or care. Even if we can prove that, it won't change the fact that Dumbledore probably just doesn't *like* me very much, and still won't consider changing our assignments. We just have to deal with it."

Harry looked very stubborn. "I'll never forgive Dumbledore if something happens to you and I never see you again, one of these times," he said.

His lower lip was jutting out ever so slightly as he scowled. Draco placed his upper lip and his tongue around it and sucked gently.

"And you're trying to tell me to stop worrying about it and just enjoy being together while we can," Harry said, more quietly, with a sigh. His hands slid into Draco's hair. "Alright. Fine. But don't anyone forget that I'm pissed off here."

"No worries," Draco said dryly, from the general area of Harry's throat.

He heard the reluctant smile in Harry's voice from above him. "And that," Harry said, somewhat absently, "is why I love you."

Draco studied the rather impressive set of tooth marks at the junction of Harry's neck and shoulder. "Why? Because I give you hickeys that last for days?"

"No, stupid," Harry said tenderly. "Because you make me remember why I'm with you every few minutes or so."

Draco wasn't quite sure what to say to that.

* * *

They were in the drawing room; it was Sunday afternoon. Brunch had been an awkward sort of affair, what with all the whispering, not to mention the not-so-subtle pointing of the Patil twins and their entourage at Harry's neck every so often - the git had, in one of his frequent displays of Gryffindor *I-do-what-I-like-so-piss-off* attitude, had chosen to wear an older DA t-shirt, one which really didn't hide his most recent hickey at all. And while Draco was frankly relieved that Harry didn't care about the fact that he'd outed them, accidentally or otherwise, upon their departure two weeks before, he did wonder if the attitude would last when Harry realized how many people still loathed homosexuality, and were bound to loathe it especially in their favourite little hero.

The staring thing was slightly better now, though - the twins, Granger, Weasley, Krum, Macmillan and Susan Bones were all in the room as well, the latter three engaged in a vicious-looking game of Exploding Snap. Draco watched the three of them for a moment, noticed how both men were attempting to engage Bones' attentions. She seemed to be keeping herself deliberately aloof from both their attempts, while still remaining quite friendly.

Oh, not this again,, Draco thought to himself, watching Krum's face in particular. Perhaps Bones would come to her senses. Krum was a decent-looking bloke, if you ignored the round-shouldered slump that he so frequently let himself slouch into. Especially when he smiled. And for a former Hufflepuff, indeed - quite a catch. Surely *Macmillan* wouldn't rival Krum in the slightest? Who ever knew, though?

Despite Snape's dark misgivings, it wasn't that Draco worried about Krum's allegiances, exactly.

But it just seemed that, if he were dating someone on their side, perhaps he'd have more reason to stay loyal than Dumbledore's lukewarm welcome to the non-ex-Gyffindors in the trainee group, especially those who'd come from checkered backgrounds.

Not that it seemed to be working for him. Draco had suspected for some time now that Dumbledore didn't fully trust him, and that that was his real reasoning behind his assignment choices. Not that the reasons he gave weren't adequate on their own, too. It just seemed so unfair. All these years, it had always looked, from the outside at least, that Dumbledore would do anything for Harry, bend any rule, breach any tradition - as long as it worked in his Golden Boy's favour. Now, of course, Draco knew better - but it still surprised him that Dumbledore would be so stubborn to this particular request on the part of his former favourite.

Even if he was only the favourite by circumstance, as Draco was the natural enemy by pure circumstance. Perhaps Dumbledore felt it was time to crack down on his young, strong-willed tool of war and make he do as he was told. To win the war, and nothing else. Draco wondered, rather suspiciously, how much anyone else would care about Harry once it was all said and done. Would they see him through the end of it? Find him a place to live and a job, after? Counselling for all the possible trauma? Somehow, Draco rather doubted it. Allow the media to continue their relentless pursuit of him, swirled constantly in rumour, fuelled by the Ministry of Magic? Oh, certainly. Let him wade through the emotional mess of his having murdered Voldemort single-handedly on his own? Sure. No doubt about it. Decorate him with medals and continue to batter him with an image he didn't want and didn't fit? Yes. Allow Draco a place in all of that, with Harry? Definitely not. He couldn't see it happening.

Harry's foot nudged him, and he looked up. "What?"

"What are you brooding about, there?" Harry asked, quietly enough to avoid being overheard.

Draco shrugged. "The future," he said vaguely. "Us. After the war."

Harry's eyes flashed something interesting, something he didn't quite catch. "After the war," he repeated.

"Yeah. Remember, real life and all? Post-Hogwarts life?" Draco pushed the toe of his trainer against Harry's. "Don't tell me you've forgotten already."

Harry looked blank. "No, I hadn't, exactly… it just seems so far off. The war could last for

years."

"It won't," Draco said positively. "It can't."

"It might," Harry said, just as positively. "It could - "

He didn't get to finish. Lupin had opened the louvered doors and caught his eye. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

Lupin came over. "New assignment," he announced. "Dumbledore wanted me to give it to you."

Granger and Weasley looked up. "For us, too?" Granger asked.

"Yes. Listen: you are to Apparate to the Ministry of Magic tomorrow in order to provide assistance with a series of curses around the building which may or may not be eavesdropping spells. New varieties. Dumbledore wants you gone at nine. You just talk to the welcomewitch when you get there, ask for Lars Skegaard when you get there; I believe he's the resident expert." Lupin looked back and forth. "Do you need to hear that again?"

His voice was patient, though slightly wary, as if worried that Harry might start yelling again. Harry merely looked defeated, though, and didn't look back. "Leave for Ministry of Magic at nine," Granger said quickly, repeating it. "I think we're fine."

Lupin gave her a half-hearted smile. "Great," he said, his concerned glance flickering quickly over Harry again.

"Do you have mine?" Draco asked, not too hopeful.

Sure enough, Lupin shook his head. "No," he said. "But the meeting just broke up, I'm sure Sev - Snape would tell you right away. I shouldn't do his job for him."

"But he's not here, and you are," Draco wheedled.

"Spare your breath, Lupin," Snape's voice came. "I am indeed here."

He appeared behind Lupin, and Draco watched the proceedings with interest. Lupin started and took a large step to the side, allowing Snape room to come forward. Snape's eyes skittered over the worn-looking form of the other, then deliberately ignored him. "Malfoy," he said. "New assignment. In the hall, if you would."

Draco got to his feet. "Certainly." He followed Snape out.

Snape closed the doors. "We are going back to Scotland," he said, with a grimace. "Dumbledore and Moody think that there may be Death Eaters right around Perth, outside the city."

"What about the city itself?" Draco asked.

"The Aurors are checking. We're not… you and I are just spies. You know that." Snape's expression was dark. "We just track. They apprehend. If possible. We will be looking for evidence of where they are meeting, what the Dark Lord is up to. Information only, not bodies. Not yet."

"Are the twins coming?"

Another grimace. "Yes. I am forced to admit their worth," Snape said, with a twist to his lip. "I hope you are satisfied."

Draco shook his head and gave a terse laugh. "Sounds great," he said. "You are I are off to the wilds of Scotland again, and Harry's going to faff about at the Ministry of Magic."

Snape gave him a look that could be called either condescending or sympathetic, depending on the angle of his face. "They think there may be a conspiracy there, actually," he said, yielding the information with reluctance. "He may actually be in more danger than you or I. Though I understand your objection."

Draco sighed. "Dumbledore doesn't trust me, does he?" he asked, looking at the wall (and a very

ugly wall sconce shaped like a goblin's head) and not really expecting a straight answer.

Snape hesistated. "Why would you think that?" he asked, his tone giving nothing away.

"It just makes sense. I should have known better," Draco said, scowling. "I should have known he'd never see past my name. I thought I could just - no, I guess I didn't. Never mind."

"I… you know that I have no influence over the matter of your… assignment," Snape said stiffly, waiting for a response.

Draco nodded, still not looking. "Yeah. I know. I just - no. Never mind."

Snape put a hand on his shoulder, wordlessly.

Draco nodded again, though neither of them had spoken. After a bit, he looked up and asked, "What about Lupin?"

Snape withdrew his hand as though Draco's shoulder had burnt it. "What about him?" It was all but a snap.

Draco gave his best scornful smile. "Please," he said. "Don't treat me like I'm eleven years old again. How are things going?"

Snape ground his teeth; Draco could hear it. "This is really none of your concern."

"True." But Draco stared, waiting.

Snape looked away. "I doubt very much that he would have any interest in a - in someone like myself."

"Is that - are you saying that because you don't actually think he *would* be interested, or because you're sure he's not?" Draco held his breath, half-expecting Snape to hit him.

Snape was quiet for a long time. "The first," he said. "And we are not discussing this any further. I will see you tomorrow - we leave at eight."

"Eight. Delightful," Draco said, suppressing another sigh. "I'll be here."

"As will I." Snape turned and swirled off.

Draco re-entered the drawing room alone. Lupin looked up, his pleasant features disappointed-looking. "Where did Snape go?" he asked.

"Not sure," Draco said, choosing his words carefully. "But I would try the kitchen - if you were wanting to - talk to him."

Lupin's features froze in their perpetually polite expression, and he gave a slight nod. "Ah," he said, more politely than ever. "Thank you."

He inclined his head to Harry and the other two, then turned and quickly left the room - avoiding eye contact with Draco at all points. Draco hid a smile and went to sit down again.

* * *

Given Draco's early departure the next day, they went to bed early. Despite having stayed in bed until around one in the afternoon. They undressed slowly and quietly, not hurried. Both trying to prolong everything. Harry gave him an odd smile before pulling the t-shirt over his tousled hair.

"What?" Draco asked, kicking off his trainers. He sat down on the edge of the bed to strip off his socks.

"It already sort of feels like home, doesn't it?" Harry asked. "You. Me. Here."

"It sort of does," Draco agreed. "The bed. The glorious, wonderful, beautiful *bed*." He lay back on it, still half-dressed, but wallowing in the bliss of the thick blankets and mattress.

Harry shook his head and laughed, coming to tower over him, his knees between Draco's at the edge of the bed. "I was talking about *us*, actually, you git," he said.

"And I," Draco informed him smugly, "was talking about the bed. I think I'm in love with it."

"You're incorrigible." Harry straddled his hips, still in his own jeans, and pushed the hardening lump of his erection against Draco.

"And you're insatiable," Draco replied, arching up nonetheless. "Mmm. That's nice." He found Harry's fingers and laced them together with his against the blanket.

Harry began to move, just shifting back and forth slightly, the look on his face suggesting that he was enjoying the state of Draco's hardening flesh immensely. "Tell me about wanking, the last two weeks," he ordered, staring down at Draco.

Draco couldn't even move, pinned beneath Harry's weight, but the friction through the layers of denim and whatever was underneath was quite incredible. "Wanking?" he repeated, trying to sound innocent. "I don't know what you're talking about." His breath hitched toward the end, but he thought he hid it nicely.

Those green eyes narrowed to slits, and Harry rode him a little harder. "You didn't wank at all while we were apart?"

"Sure I did," Draco said, trying to sound casual. "Now and then. Didn't you?"

"Oh, I did," Harry assured him. He stopped what he'd been doing suddenly, and got up, releasing Draco. "Every now and then," he said, unbuttoning his jeans and dealing with the zip, "I'd sneak off from wherever Ron and Hermione were, and have a wank, thinking about you. Ron almost caught me one day," he added casually, sliding his jeans down narrow hips and thighs and stepping out of them entirely.

He took a step forward, watching Draco, his eyes glittering. "Your turn," Harry said. He undid Draco's jeans and rubbed his erection through the thick material. "Tell me."

Draco pushed against the warm hand cradling his cock and let one hand wander to his nipple, squeezing it. "It was hard to get away from all three of them," he said, giving in. "And at night - not with Snape there! Talk about a turn-off. But sometimes we'd say we were going to take a piss or something, and be gone too long for it to have really just been that. That's what I always said."

Harry's hand squeezed a little harder. "Did you think about me while you were wanking?"

"Yeah," Draco admitted, his voice husky. "Harry - let me take these off. I have to fuck you."

Harry smiled sweetly. "That's what I wanted to hear," he said, and pulled Draco up. Together, they wrestled Draco free of his remaining clothes and fell back onto the bed, limbs tangling together. Harry brought their faces together and kissed him hard, and for several long, tantalizing minutes, they just kissed and rubbed themselves together. Harry pulled his face back after a bit. "I want it hard," he said, his voice low. "And a bit rough. Can we do that?"

Draco's cock spasmed, and he gritted his teeth. "Yes."

Harry smiled. "Good. Can we - " he rolled away from Draco, lying on his front - "try it like this?"

Gods. "Certainly," Draco said, hoping he sounded nonchalant. "Where's - "

"*Accio* lube," Harry said commandingly, and the tube slid out from under one of the pillows and sailed to his hand.

Draco took his from him. "Do you want me to prepare you?"

"No, just do you," Harry said. He sounded utterly content, with an underlying strain of excitement.

Draco obeyed, slicking lube over himself, then straddled Harry's hips and positioned himself. "It's going to hurt," he warned. "It's been awhile for you, remember?"

"I want it to hurt," Harry said, almost lazily. "I have lots of time to heal, don't I?"

"True," Draco agreed. He pushed he head of his cock into Harry's heat and waited. "Okay?"

"Keep - keep going."

Draco shook his head to himself, smiling, and pushed further, slowly, until he was fully seated. "Still good?"

"Yeah."

Draco could hear the pain in his voice, but Harry wasn't telling him to stop, seemingly. He began to move, just slow, gentle strokes. It felt so good, Harry was so tight. It was all he could do not to just start thrusting away until the darkness took him.

"You can go harder," Harry said, desire lacing the pain in his voice.

Draco held his lover's ribcage and tried not to moan. "You feel amazing," he said, his voice rasping in his lust and need. Harry's firm arse cheeks were against Draco's lower abdomen, rubbing as he began to thrust into his body, his hands moving to Harry's back, his shoulders, massaging occasionally, just rubbing in circles other times. The feeling was consuming him already. Harry was moving beneath him, just a little, probably rubbing himself against the blankets, an occasional soft sound coming from between his lips.

"Harder," Harry requested again, after a bit.

It was all the invitation he needed; Draco was just barely keeping his control as it was. It snapped now, and he was pounding into Harry, hard, just fucking him blind. Harry's sounds grew higher in pitch, tinged in pain, but the pleasure was winning; Draco could hear it. His hands were on Harry's hips now, gripping hard as he thrust away. He forced one hand between Harry's hip and the blankets, found his erection and grabbed, twisting, squeezing. There - it was seizing him, his climax, and he could feel Harry's hole tightening around him - Draco came furiously, his breath gasping wildly. Harry was moaning beneath him, his face buried in the blankets, and Draco's hand was wet.

When Draco could move again, he pulled himself out, weakly, and let himself fall beside Harry.

Harry turned over immediately, pushed Draco onto his back and arranged himself on Draco's chest, his mouth on one of Draco's nipples. "Tha's amazing," he slurred, his words muffled against Draco's chest.

Draco's fingers found their way back into Harry's hair, his other hand closing loosely around Harry's arm, flung across his chest. "Yeah, it was," he agreed, still breathing hard. "Did you like bottoming better like that?"

Harry paused, considering. "No," he said eventually. "I mean, that felt really good. But I like being face-to-face better. What about you?"

Draco pulled him up. "I like it better face-to-face, too," he said, and kissed him. "This way was good."

"But it felt more like just sex," Harry said, voicing Draco's unspoken thought. "Yeah. Give me a few minutes, then, and we can go back to the other way."

"You *are* insatiable," Draco said, and they both laughed.

"I don't hear *you* complaining," Harry said, not quite defensively.

"I'm not, git."

"Good."

* * *

Morning came too early, as per usual, though Draco felt that his fatigue was probably deserved. Harry yawned and shut off Draco's beeping wand. "Too early," he mumbled.

"I know." Draco yawned, too, and poked Harry. "Move. I have to get up."

"I'm getting up, too."

"You don't have to."

"I know." Harry opened his eyes again, and sighed before swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He pushed himself up and headed, nude, for his clothes. Turning around to pull his boxers on, Draco's eye wandered immediately to Harry's partial erection. Harry caught his eye. "Do we have time?" he asked quietly.

Draco checked the time. "If we hurry. Come back here." He sat up, then stood and pointed at the bed. "Sit there."

Harry grinned and stepped back out of his boxers, doing as he was told. Draco knelt in front of him. "I said I missed this," he said, "but I never got to."

Harry's breath sucked in. "You don't need to - "

"Do stop saying that." Draco licked one of his hands and started to massage the base of Harry's cock before taking the head into his mouth. In the end, it didn't take very long - and Harry insisted on returning the favour (which Draco really didn't mind at all), and by the time they'd gotten dressed, Draco was very nearly late. He had five minutes to get downstairs.

Harry went with him, of course, and they kept talking all the way down the stairs. "Do you know when you're coming back?"

"No, do you?"

"Not yet. I'll owl you and keep you posted," Harry said.

"Where is Hedwig? I haven't seen her all weekend."

"I sent her back to Hogwarts for a bit of a rest," Harry said. "We don't want owls seen around here, anyway. I told her to find me today sometime. I'm sure she will."

"She's very smart," Draco agreed. He saw Snape at the bottom of the stairs and nodded to him. The twins were there already, yawning and uncharacteristically quiet.

"Ask him," Harry said, gesturing toward Snape.

Snape looked at Harry as though he were still a disobedient student. "No, Mr. Potter," he said, with strained patience, "I do not know when this assignment ends. I am expecting instructions as we go."

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again. He nodded. "Okay," he said, clearly not happy about this, but knowing better than to question Snape about it.

Draco gave him a shrug and a commiserating look. "Sorry," he said. "Owl me soon. Hopefully it won't be too long."

"Probably longer than two weeks this time, though," Harry said, glancing at Snape warily.

Snape nodded. "Very likely," he said.

Draco turned to look at him, the immediacy of his leaving hitting him hard right then. Harry looked very young when he was upset, and he was definitely upset but making a valiant effort to stay calm. "I love you," Harry said, quietly - though not quietly enough that everyone else present didn't also hear.

Draco took a step toward him and told himself to ignore the others. He put his left hand on the right side of Harry's face. "I love you, too," he said, his voice coming out steadier than he'd thought it might. Harry's face tilted easily under his hand and they kissed for a long, sweet few moments, tongues stroking, not pushing, lips gripping but not demanding. Not this time. Draco was all too aware that this time really could be the last, and he could feel that Harry felt it, too. They broke apart, and Harry pulled him into a fiercely tight hug.

"Stay safe," he said, the tightness there in his voice, too.

"I will," Draco promised. "You, too." He kissed the top of Harry's head and reluctantly let go.

Snape, miraculously, hadn't said anything. He was staring at the ceiling with a studied air, and only stirred when Draco announced quietly that he was ready to go.

Snape handed him a slip of paper containing the co-ordinates for their Apparation, and the twins shook themselves away. "On my word," Snape said. His eyes, like Draco's, were on Harry.

Harry was leaning forlornly against the banister, and Draco only noticed then that Lupin was also present. Lupin put a hand on Harry's shoulder, squeezing gently, and said, "Take care, Severus."

Snape started just a bit, perhaps at the use of his given name, but recovered quickly enough. "Thank you," he said, avoiding any use of name, "I will."

Lupin nodded, with a faint smile. "I will, too."

"Right." Snape squared his shoulders. "One - two - three."

Draco Disapparated.

A/N: Feedback? Tell me what you thought!

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Chapter: 27

Chapter 27: In the Lowlands

Draco sat down tiredly, one hand on the small of his back. He rubbed slowly, wishing someone else was there to do it for him. His eyes were fixed on the fast-moving Tay river at the bottom of the gentle slope, and he had to admit that the current terrain was gentler than the Highlands had been. The Lowlands afforded a much easier journey, though Draco still would have vastly preferred being indoors, all the same. A grunt and a sigh of relief told him that Snape had joined

him. Draco began the conversation with a complete disregard for preamble.

"What would he be doing in Perth, of all places?" he asked, knowing he sounded disgusted. Draco unlaced one trainer and pulled it off, shaking out a rough pebble that had gotten rather too intimate with the sole of his right foot. "From what I understand, it's a charming, little tourist town."

"True," Snape agreed. "Doesn't that make it all the more likely a suspect?"

He reached into his pocket and brought out his pack, expanding it. Rummaging, Snape drew out his pipe and continued searching for its associated accoutrements. "I suppose," Draco conceded. "Only, it seems odd that no one would notice. Isn't it rather small? Only fifty thousand or so, isn't it?"

"Probably less," Snape agreed. He lit the pipe and sighed contentedly. "Ahh. Don't ever start smoking, Malfoy. It's terrible for you."

Draco looked at Snape and restrained himself, by a narrow margin, from snorting. "I'm sure. Smells alright, though."

"You have to puff continually to keep them from going out. And the taste does not remotely resemble the scent."

Draco rolled his eyes at the horizon. "Sounds like a ringing endorsement. Listen, did you talk to Dumbledore over the weekend?"

Snape puffed for several more seconds in relative silence. Behind them, the sounds of Fred and George arguing over the stew could be heard. It was familiar. At last, Snape answered him. "Yes. At some length."

Draco pulled out his own pack and made it full-size again, taking out his water. He took a sip, then said, "He doesn't trust me, does he?"

Snape made a sound which might have been a gentle snort. "You must admit, you are something of a security risk."

"How so?" Draco demanded, suddenly really pissed off. "I swore my oath like everyone else, didn't I? Is it because I'm a Slytherin? Because of my father? Because of me in particular? Or all of the above?"

"All of the above," Snape answered evenly.

That silenced Draco for a moment. He hadn't thought that Snape would admit it. "Well, the only part I can help there is my own track record," he said sullenly. "And I'm not ashamed of having been in Slytherin."

Snape chuckled to himself. "Good."

"I can't help who my father is."

"Nor can most of us," Snape agreed.

"He can't possibly think that I'd hurt Harry."

"It is difficult," Snape said, his eyes narrowed against the light of the setting sun on the horizon opposite, "to know precisely what that man is thinking at any given time."

Draco turned his head to look at his former head of House. "But you talked to him."

"I did. That does not mean I understand him," Snape said evasively.

"Surely you understand him better than I do," Draco challenged.

Snape sighed and puffed again. "There are a lot of factors to consider," he said. "Say you were in charge of running our side of the war. You would need to suspect everyone, just about. Suppose you suspect Krum, because he went to Durmstrang and virtually all of his classmates were enrolled in the Dark Lord's camp this summer. Suppose you notice that he has become friendly, at least, with the one former Slytherin, who comes from a long line of Dark wizards and

anti-Dumbledore sentiment. That would be enough to put you under suspicion right there. Second: suppose you suspect that said Slytherin is merely using your boy hero tool merely for sexual gratification and would almost certainly leave him at the first sign of something better. Zabini, he knows you have history with. He is far from blind, Malfoy. And you have been alone with him since his capture. Harry trusts you, certainly. But would *you* trust you, if you were Dumbledore? Be honest."

Draco thought for a long time, his back hunched against the cool air starting to chill his limbs. "No," he said eventually.

"Neither would I. We are Slytherins. We were born to think that way. Dumbledore has to impose it on himself. He is naturally far more trusting, and consequently bears this in mind better than we do, perhaps. It may be over-compensation. And it may not." Snape looked at him, and there was an odd mix of pity and compassion on his face. "The other thing you must consider is that Dumbledore is desperately afraid."

"Afraid," Draco echoed, not believing it. "Afraid of what?"

"Losing," Snape said quietly. "You realize he is virtually responsible for the safety of the entire world at this moment? One false step, and it could cost us the entire war. He does not have time to deal with the finer feelings of two eighteen-year-old b - young men, no matter how important they are to him, personally."

"If you're trying to suggest that he still thinks he's being unfairly *caring* to Harry - "

"That is *not* what I am suggesting. That is what I am telling you is the truth, Malfoy." Snape took a mighty drag, and coughed. "If Dumbledore stops thinking about the overall plan at any time, we could lose everything. Do you understand that?"

Draco pulled up his legs and rested his chin on his knees. "I suppose so," he said reluctantly, after awhile.

Snape coughed again. "There is something else as well," he said. "I was not told that I was *not* to tell you, so I will. Please keep it to yourself, at least for the time being." Draco looked at him. Snape looked back for a moment, very serious, before turning his face back to the horizon. "Zabini escaped."

Shock. "What?!" Draco demanded. "I thought he was being transferred to the criminal ward at St. Mungo's!"

"He was to be," Snape said, grimacing. "We hesitated. We wanted to be sure, before condemning him to a possible lifetime of - undeserved or unnecessary treatment. I know you agreed to it - but we were never certain. Even Pomfrey could not be certain. And if he were not needing treatment, then what to do with him? Return him to us? We were breaking camp. He escaped the morning we all left on the first assignment, while the camp was being struck. That alone should tell us all something about his mental capabilities."

Draco was more horrified than he cared to admit. "I really did think he was sick," he offered.

"He is obsessed with you," Snape said, his tone unreadable.

"Yes. But maybe - I don't know," Draco said, frustrated. "I have no idea."

"I assume he has returned to the Dark Lord," Snape said quietly.

"If they'll take him *back*," Draco said. "He told us where V - where the Dark Lord is!"

Snape winced. "If it is true, then yes, he will probably suffer greatly," he said.

"Would they let him live?"

"It all depends on their estimation of his worth," Snape said bitterly.

Draco wondered what memories were currently going through his former teacher's mind, but left off asking. "Dumbledore doesn't think *I* had anything to do with it, does he?"

Snape was suspiciously quiet. "We may never know," he said.

"Damn it, could I take Veritaserum and swear on it, for fuck's sake?" Draco demanded, his fury

sudden boiling over.

"Calm down," Snape said firmly. "The very strong of mind can resist it. Dumbledore knows that you are a powerful wizard, Malfoy. You cannot fault him for seeing all the possibilities."

Draco shook his head. "This is so fucked up," he said, and stood. He stalked back to where the twins were, and sullenly set up the two tents by himself.

* * *

"What," Snape said slowly, his tone sounding more affronted than Draco had heard it in years, "in the name of Merlin is *this*?"

The twins glanced at each other, and Fred said sourly, "It's haddock chowder. Don't eat it if you don't like it."

Draco studied the contents of his bowl. It looked alright and it smelled fine, and he now had some insight into whatever it had been that the twins had been arguing about earlier. He shot a look at Snape, who was still staring at it as though it might be poisoned. He grunted and sampled a *very* small bit of it. When he said nothing, George exhaled quietly, but Draco heard it and looked at him. George shrugged and gave a half-apologetic nod toward his twin. Whatever. He didn't need to know. Draco picked up his spoon and tried the chowder. It was good, actually.

His spoon hit something that made a clinking sound against it. "What the fuck?" Draco muttered. He pushed the chowder around until he came up against a full set of teeth. With fangs. He looked up disbelievingly, at George again, and got the same look in return. "Fred," Draco said, weighing each syllable, "why are there teeth in here?"

Snape dropped his spoon with a clatter. "Teeth?"

Suddenly, Fred grinned. "Sorry about that," he said. "There weren't supposed to be teeth. I tried to - uh - remove them."

Snape prodded within his bowl and his scowl deepened. "Before or after you cooked the victims?"

"Both," Fred admitted. "But it's good, right?"

Snape looked over at Draco. "Why," he asked, sounding tired, "did I let anyone talk me into having them around?"

"They *are* better cooks than we are," Draco offered in return, although he mostly just wanted to snap, *just eat it and shut up, for fuck's sake.* He was in no mood for the bickering today. And why couldn't Fred *ever* do things the normal way? It had been a week already, and still, no one had said anything about how much longer they'd be away. Draco was privately convinced that Dumbledore wouldn't let them return until they'd found something.

The outskirts of Perth were fairly nice, but Draco almost wished he hadn't had the chance to sleep in a real bed and have real showers again; now he thought about it constantly. He finished his chowder in silence, and got up to walk around. Or rather, go and find somewhere quiet to relieve himself. He wandered off to find somewhere private. When he was finished, he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out the one letter Harry had written so far. He'd already written back, but in the meanwhile, he re-read the one letter he had over and over again. It was crumpled by now, but Draco smoothed it as he unfolded it.

Dear Draco,

I can't believe it's only been three days since I last saw you. It already feels like a month, and it's driving me mad. I'm so bored without you, you know. We're hardly doing anything here. I'm not supposed to say, obviously, but they think there might be some sort of network of dark stuff where I am, and they want us to hunt it out and trace it to its sources. It's more interesting than I thought it might be, but I need your cunning to help me figure it out. We don't have any idea who might be behind it all. If there's anything there in the first place. For all we know, it could all just be circumstance.

Anyway, enough about that. I wish I knew where you were, exactly, and how you're doing. Has S

said anything about RL? I think it would be nice for both of them, if it worked out. S is a snarky git, though. Who knows. How are the other two? Are they annoying the hell out of you yet, or do they keep you smiling?

I wank too much, you know. I always wonder if you might be wanking at the same time. We've already been back at HQ for meetings and stuff. It's not the same without you, though. I feel guilty, being in our bed without you there. Otherwise, we sleep in some sort of barracks in the city. Anyway, I'm out of space again, as usual. I love you and I miss you, like always.

Love,
Harry.

Draco closed his eyes. Harry wrote almost just the way he spoke, and even reading his words for the hundredth time was a tiny comfort. He felt shoved aside and out of the loop, out here in Perthshire, even if most of the other student groups were out and away from London, too. It was hard not to feel like Dumbledore just wanted him out of the way. But what he could do about it, except do his job and hope it all ended soon?

With Harry alive.

* * *

"I've had word from Dumbledore," Snape announced. It was six days later, and they were on the Tayside of Perth now. Thirteen days, altogether, since they'd left Grimmauld Place, and Perthshire was quiet and peaceful. Draco looked up from his fire-grilled toast with interest, noticing peripherally that the twins were doing the same.

"When?" Fred asked.

"In the night. An owl," Snape replied.

Right, he'd been on watch, Draco remembered. "What did he say?" he asked.

"We are to go into the city. I have kept him informed of our findings, or lack thereof, and although there are Aurors in the city, he thinks it best that we take a look." Snape said this all very matter-of-factly.

Draco and the twins looked at each other. "What about nights?" George asked practically. "Will we come back out here, or stay in town somewhere?"

"Stay in town, I think, unless it seems dangerous," Snape replied, frowning thoughtfully. "I suggest we begin making our way in. We are less than ten miles from the city limits."

"Sounds good," Fred decided. "Leaving straightaway, then?"

"Yes," Snape said simply. "Whenever you are ready."

Draco stood. "Let's go."

* * *

It did feel somewhat surreal, strolling along Tay Street, the occasion car going by. Draco felt as though he'd been away from civilized life for a long, long time. A few side street turns, and Snape was stopping them again for a Dark-detecting spell. Draco was frankly not even sure how one looked for Death Eaters in the city. Not that he'd ever been sure how to find them, other than stumbling directly into them, should ones Dark detectors not be doing the trick. "Is this always how you do it?" he asked Snape, as they turned on to Victoria.

"Spy?" Snape replied absently. "Certainly. It is mostly guess-work."

"Then how - " Draco stopped suddenly, shocked, his mouth gaping. Then his reflexes kicked in, and he Disillusioned himself two seconds later. "Snape! Disillusion!" he hissed. "Fred! George!"

"On it, mate," one of them said from behind. "What's up?"

Draco looked wildly about for Snape. Detecting a faint shifting of the sidewalk concrete beside him, he located his former professor. "Café," he said weakly. "My father."

He heard Snape's quick breath, and one of the twins cursed loudly. But it was true. Directly to Draco's left, there was a tiny café. And seated casually in one of the tartan-patterned booths, sipping coffee across from Rabastan Lestrange, was Lucius Malfoy. Draco watched in transfixed horror as Lucius reached for a scone and pulled a small piece off it. He didn't eat it; merely gesturing with it as he spoke. His eyes were narrowed, and Draco thought that the lines around them had deepened since he'd last seen Lucius. Last Christmas, it had been. Nearly ten months ago.

He felt Snape's hand on his shoulder. "Come," Snape said urgently. "We mustn't linger."

He was led forcibly into a small alley not far away. "This was foolish," Snape's voice said. "Weasleys?"

"We're here."

"Apparate to Headquarters at once. We will discuss more once we have seen Dumbledore."

Draco was still too shocked to speak, but heard the twins assent without argument. "On my word," Snape's voice said. "One - two - three."

Draco Disapparated.

Snape knocked on the front door of Number Twelve and quickly removed the Disillusionment Charm. After a few moments, during which Snape shifted and muttered darkly to himself, Lupin answered the door. He looked very surprised to see Snape, but immediately said, "Severus. Come in. Where are the students?"

"Disillusioned," was all the explanation Snape gave, sweeping by Lupin. Draco followed him, removing the charm in the hallway. The twins did the same, greeting Lupin in subdued tones.

Lupin looked sharply at Snape. "What is going on?"

"Death Eaters sighted," Snape said curtly. "Is Dumbledore here?"

"No, he's at the Ministry," Lupin said. "There was a problem."

"A problem?" Draco demanded. "What kind of problem?"

Lupin hesitated. "I'm not sure, exactly," he said. "Something to do with the network of spells."

Harry. Cold fear bit into Draco's flesh and he shuddered.

"Do you know when he is expected back?" Snape asked, frustrated and impatient already.

"No," Lupin said, apologizing. "Come in and have something to eat or something. Tea."

The four of them looked at each other, but Snape decided for them. "Nothing else to do," he said, and turned to follow Lupin into the basement kitchen.

It made sense, of course, but Draco just wanted to pace and wait for news. Which meant, in all likelihood, Dumbledore. *He'd damn well better be helping over there.* He jumped when George touched his elbow awkwardly.

"Come on, mate," he said. "There's nothing we can do until we know what's going on, anyway. And you've had a shock. Come and have lunch."

Lunch. It was a ludicrous notion, really. There was an emergency of some sort at the Ministry, one serious enough to warrant Dumbledore rushing over, and Draco was expected to eat lunch. "No." He jerked his sleeve out of George's fingers. "I'll be in here." He nodded toward the parlour just off the hall, where Harry's meeting with Dumbledore had been the last time they'd been here. It had windows facing the street. "I'm not hungry."

George hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure. I'll come down if I want something."

Sighing, George gave in. "Fine," he said.

"Be better than my haddock chowder," Fred said, from the top of the stairs.

Draco ignored him and went into the parlour.

It was very quiet. He sat down on a dusty, old couch and waited. The sounds of a grandfather clock's ticking hands were the only sound he could hear. Harry's assignment had something to do with the possibility of there being eavesdropping spells at the Ministry. That was all he knew. It didn't sound dire, unless the spies who had placed them were actual Ministry workers. And if they were, and had uncovered Harry and his team's efforts to dismantle and trace them - then things could be very bad.

But the Prophecy clearly stated that only Voldemort had the power to kill Harry. And if Lucius was in Perth, then surely so was Voldemort. Still. Hosts of nervous butterflies swarmed Draco's belly and made him nearly nauseous with fear. What was happening?

After about an hour, he heard voices outside the parlour door, which he'd left open. The speakers were somewhere between the stairs and the door, though; not in sight.

"Where is Draco?" Lupin's gentle, steady voice asked, sounding concerned.

"I don't know. Probably best to leave him alone," Snape's voice advised.

A sigh. "You're probably right. You know him better than I do."

"Few people know him really well," Snape said, his tone odd.

"Except Harry, you mean," Lupin responded, a wry smile in his voice.

"I suppose so," Snape admitted.

There was an odd sort of pause. "Severus," Lupin said hesitantly, and trailed off.

Draco could see, in his mind's eye, Snape stiffening. "Yes?"

"I… just wanted to say thank you, for making my potion for me for all these years," Lupin said lamely.

A snort of surprised laughter. "It is not a problem," Snape said, sounding amused. "What on earth made you think of thanking me *now*, at this particular moment?"

Lupin's shrug was there in his voice, too. "I don't know. I just thought - you know, one of these times, I might not see you again. I wouldn't want our old feud to go by without any sort of resolution happening."

"Has it happened?" Snape asked dryly. "If so, I missed the announcement."

"Didn't you get the memo?" Lupin asked lightly. "I was under the impression that we no longer hated one another."

"Well, you and I, perhaps - " Snape started, then stopped abruptly.

Lupin's voice was just a tad strained. "That's all there is left of us," he said tightly. "James and Sirius are dead, Severus. And Peter is better left unmentioned."

"True," Snape answered, his voice tight now, too. "Then I suppose it would be rather - churlish - to keep it going, just for appearance' sake."

"Churlish indeed," Lupin agreed.

There was another pause. "Then I suppose it is resolved," Snape said stiffly. "I apologize for having given your secret away."

"You mean back at Hogwarts?" Lupin asked, surprised.

"Both times," Snape said, with what sounded like a grimace. "A few years ago, as well as when we were students."

"Ah. I… appreciate it, Severus," Lupin said. "In turn, my apologies for having frightened you so. It was never my intention, and I was not party to the plan."

"I am aware of that," Snape said.

Another pause. "The fact is," Lupin said, matter-of-factly, "that I would miss you very much - should you be disposed of on one of these journeys, Severus."

Snape took a sudden breath. "Would you," he said, and Draco thought he sounded nervous. He smiled tightly to himself, despite the tension wracking his shoulders.

"Yes, I would," Lupin said quietly.

Just then, someone knocked at the door. Draco jumped to his feet and went to the window. He could just see Dumbledore's hair and the edges of his robes, and tore out of the room. "It's Dumbledore!" he said, aware that he had thoroughly startled the two men in the hall. He went to unlock the door, but Lupin came and pushed him gently aside.

"The doors only respond to my fingerprints these days," he explained, unlocking the many bolts. He opened the door, admitting the old man. "Dumbledore. Come in. How is everything?"

"Under control," Dumbledore said, sounding weary, and his eyes went to Draco and Snape and widened. "My - Severus, what has happened?"

His tone was sharp and more alert already. "Death Eaters in Perth," Snape said. "It looks as though Zabini was correct, after all."

"Who?" Dumbledore's gaze was piercing; his tone like a needle.

Snape's gaze flickered briefly to Draco. "Lucius Malfoy and Rabastan Lestrange."

Dumbledore's eyes went to Draco, too. "Were you seen?"

"I do not think so," Snape answered him. "Thanks to Malfoy's quick wit, we had time to Disillusion ourselves and get away. We arrived just over an hour ago."

"What's going on at the Ministry?" Draco asked, unable to wait any longer. "Is - is everything alright?" He wanted to ask if Harry in particular was alright, but thought better of it.

Dumbledore gave him a long, kindly gaze. "Come downstairs," he said. "I am very hungry and could use a cup of tea. I will tell you all about it."

Draco didn't need a second invitation. He followed the three older men down to the kitchen. Lupin immediately busied himself with edging the twins out of the way and making soup and sandwiches. "Draco, are you hungry yet?" he asked mildly.

"Yes, actually," Draco admitted. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. It's nothing fancy."

The kettle boiled and Snape actually went for it. "I will make the tea," he announced.

Lupin gave him a surprised, but pleased glance. "Thank you, Severus," he said.

"Look, do we have to be here for this?" Fred asked from near the doorway. "Because if not, I could use a nap."

"Go ahead," Snape said, not bothering to check with Dumbledore as he poured hot water into a large, ceramic teapot. This he brought to the table and set down to steep. Lupin brought over two bowls of steaming chicken noodle soup and a platter of sandwiches.

"Oops, forgot - *accio* spoons," Lupin said, and handed both Dumbledore and Draco a soup before sitting down a short distance from Draco.

Snape sat down near Dumbledore and waited.

Dumbledore checked the tea. "There *is* a spy in the Ministry, as I had thought," he said tiredly. "We do not yet know who it is. But I was also correct about the network of eavesdropping spells. The question is how to dismantle them without possibly setting off alarms to the spy. It's very complicated spellwork, but the team is actually doing quite well. Skegaard knows his business."

Draco looked blankly at Snape, who merely said, "The specialist. Go on."

Dumbledore took a spoonful of the hot soup, blowing on it a little before eating it. It occurred to Draco that he'd never actually seen the man eat before. There was something comfortingly human about it, despite his current feelings for him. "Today," Dumbledore said, "they tripped an alarm spell."

Draco didn't realize that his hand had clenched around his spoon. "What happened?" he asked tensely. "Did the spy show up?"

"Yes and no," Dumbledore said, frowning. "About thirty people showed up, and the spy could have been among them. The alarm was quite loud. It set off an intruder-alert in the Ministry, effectively notifying everyone to the fact that the team is there, which I'd rather hoped to keep quiet. I arrived just after the alarm, and got the students back to their barracks. They've been instructed to come here this afternoon."

"Why not have them come straight back here?" Lupin asked, his brow creasing.

Dumbledore glanced at Draco. "Part of the intruder alert," he said reluctantly, "involves fire, and Harry and Ron both sustained a few burns. Poppy is at the barracks and is taking care of it. There should be nothing to worry about."

He resumed eating his soup. Draco couldn't. He looked at Snape, feeling that more should really be said about all of this. "But now the spy knows they're there! And what they're working on!"

"Presumably," Snape agreed. He looked at Dumbledore. "You will not send them back, will you?"

"I must," Dumbledore said, looking concerned. "They are the best team for it, and we must get this solved before information starts being leaked."

"But - "

Draco's protest was cut off by the sound of the front door being knocked on. "I'll get it," Lupin said immediately. "It's probably Molly. She was going to come in and do some cleaning, now that Kreacher's gone to his long home." He paused and caught Draco's eye sympathetically. "If it's Harry - and it probably won't be, yet - I'll send him straight down. You eat."

Draco sighed and stayed where he was. Dumbledore gave him a small smile and poured himself tea. "Tea, Severus? Draco?"

They both accepted, though Draco's ears were trained on the stairs.

There it was - the almost expected flurry of thumping, and the door burst open. "Draco!" Harry exclaimed. "You're here!"

Draco got out of his chair in record time and backed Harry back through the doorway, pulling it closed behind him. He attacked his lover with his arms and mouth at the same time, their lean bodies fitting together with the ease of long familiarity. The kiss was long and very nearly violent, and it was wonderful. "Are you alright?" Draco asked, catching his breath. "Dumbledore said you got burned."

Harry didn't pull away in the least. "It's nothing. Kiss me, I missed you."

There came a gentle throat-clearing from the top of the stairs. Draco glanced up over Harry's head and saw Lupin's tolerant smile. "Don't suppose I might get past you to get back into the kitchen, could I?"

"Go ahead," Draco said, and pulled himself and Harry out of the way.

"I still want you to finish your soup," Lupin said mildly, passing them. "You're too thin by half." He closed the door behind them.

Harry laughed. "Ron and Hermione went upstairs first," he said, "but they're coming right down, and then I expect I'll have a meeting."

"How long do you think we have?"

"Ten minutes?"

"Ten minutes it is, then," Draco announced. "First floor, parlour, now."

"No arguments here," Harry murmured, and took the stairs two at a time, Draco close behind him.

This time, Draco *did* close the doors. And locked them. "Where are your burns?" he asked, searching what he could see of Harry.

"My arms," Harry admitted. "But Pomfrey mended most of it. It's just a little tender."

"I'll be gentle," Draco promised.

"I've missed you so much - I had no *idea* you'd be here, or I would have come straight here from the Ministry - " Harry was babbling.

Draco went to him and put his arms around his shoulders, mindful of Harry's arms. "I missed you, too, git. And I wasn't expecting to be here, or I'd have told you."

"Why *are* you here, then?" Harry pulled his glasses off and shoved them into a pocket.

"Long story," Draco said briefly. "I'm sure you'll hear all about it. Let's snog."

"Right," Harry said decidedly, and brought their mouths together.

It was good. It was so very good. Draco could have drowned in the kiss alone, but Harry was so close to him, and then a warm hand was sliding down the front of his jeans. And then it wasn't enough, and they had to stop and deal with zips and buttons and just get things out of the way, and then it was all hot mouths and warm hands on hard cocks, and the wonderful sensation of it all. It was perfect; he was with Harry again. Harry was sighing into Draco's mouth, and then they were going harder, rubbing faster, and Draco's eyes were squeezing shut, panting as his body released into Harry's hand near about the same time as Harry pushed into his, his body shaking and shooting liquid warmth into Draco's hand. It was over too soon, but it was something. Draco found his wand with his other hand, cleaned their hands and resumed kissing Harry with an unhealthy amount of enthusiasm. "*Gods*," he breathed then. Otherwise, they hadn't spoken a word throughout.

Harry opened his eyes and smiled. "Miss me?"

"Don't even joke about it, Harry."

"I'll take that as a yes."

There was a knock, and Weasley tentatively called, "Harry? Dumbledore wants us down in the kitchen. There's lunch, too."

"Be right there," Harry said. Suddenly, he laughed.

"What?"

"You can finish your soup now," Harry said.

Draco grinned. "This was *much* better."

Dark brows went up suggestively. "Oh? Well, good - you have no idea what I've got planned for

afters!"

"Oh, I most certainly hope I do." Draco slipped his hand into Harry's, still grinning. "Let's go."

Harry leaned over and kissed his neck. "Okay."

* * *

It was amazing how everything just seemed better when Harry was there. The twins' jokes were funny again; Dumbledore didn't seem half bad. And Snape and Lupin appeared to have eyes mostly for one another and not much else. They were hardly mooning about, but Snape seemed unusually distracted and comments directed to him usually had to be repeated. Unless it was Lupin speaking. And Lupin simply managed to always seem to be in the same room as Snape. Draco had repeated the conversation he'd overheard to Harry at the first possible moment, and they now had the secret fun of watching the bizarre courtship together.

Lupin Banished the dishes from supper and brought out a pudding which Molly Weasley had dropped off that afternoon. She'd been and gone, fussing briefly over her sons, Harry and Hermione, then left again. Lupin began dishing it out. Snape got up and brought the kettle over. "Dumbledore," he asked, returning to the table, "how long are we all staying here?"

Harry tensed beside Draco. "I'm not going back to the barracks tonight," he said firmly, as though daring Dumbledore to challenge him.

Dumbledore's gaze flickered over them. "I wasn't going to suggest it," he said, with the ghost of a smile. "Why don't you all stay until tomorrow? The Aurors and I are still deciding what to do about the Ministry situation. And you four - " he nodded at Draco, the twins and Snape - "know what you must do next."

"Tracking spells can be very complicated," Snape said, sighing, "but we will do what we can."

Draco looked at him. "When are we doing the blood letting?"

"In a few minutes," Snape said absently. He looked at Lupin. "We will need two witnesses in order for the potion to take effect. I assume that Potter will be there. Would you mind - ?"

"Not at all," Lupin said immediately, trying not to look too pleased. "We can use the fourth floor drawing room; it has little furniture and a lot of space."

"Good," Snape said, and gave Lupin a strange, half-smile.

Harry nudged Draco hard under the table, and Draco saw that he was fighting to keep from bursting into laughter.

Dumbledore sipped his tea. "Thank you for dinner, Remus. It was wonderful."

Lupin shrugged modestly. "Just doing my hostly duty," he said. "I wish I could do more."

"Please, Remus," Dumbledore said gently. "Someone has to be here at all times. I am endlessly grateful that you do this."

Lupin looked embarrassed and didn't know what to say. Snape cleared his throat, breaking up the awkward silence, and began collecting the dessert dishes. "So, tomorrow we leave again," he said.

"As soon as your potion is ready," Dumbledore agreed.

Granger spoke up, addressing Snape. "Do you need any help with the potion, Professor?"

Snape gave her a wary look. "No. Thank you. Malfoy will be there if I do." He tossed Harry a faintly-triumphant sneer, but to Draco's surprise, Harry just rolled his eyes back, smiling.

"Git," he muttered under his breath. And that was it for the exchange.

Lupin got to his feet. "I'll show you to that drawing room and help you get set up," he said to Snape.

* * *

They were the last ones in the drawing room that night. Finally, the twins pulled themselves to their feet and went off to bed. Nothing had been seen of Lupin or Snape since the potion had been made. Dumbledore had gone back to Hogwarts, and Weasley and Granger had long since disappeared into their room. The doors were open, though, and anyone could have come in at any time. Harry shivered and pulled the blanket higher over them. They'd been sitting side by side, but now Harry repositioned them, pushing Draco's raised right knee back and settling himself between Draco's legs, with both of them facing sideways. Draco adjusted and slid his arms around Harry's torso. Harry sighed contentedly and put his hands over Draco's on his belly.

"I don't want you to go back tomorrow," he said.

Draco hugged him, hard. This position made him feel somehow more protective than usual. He put his chin on Harry's shoulder and spoke into his ear. "There's no point in even talking about it. We both know it's going to happen. Tomorrow will always come. All we have is right now."

Harry stayed quiet for a moment, closing his eyes as Draco's nose and lips nuzzled at his ear. "I suppose that's all anyone has," he said tightly. "Maybe it's selfish to say I want more, though. I do want more. I want forever."

"I want it, too," Draco whispered. Harry's head turned then, and they were kissing, Draco's hands rubbing over Harry's muscled flesh, sliding under his flimsy t-shirt. Harry pushed his hands down to the hardness between his legs, and Draco undid his jeans as easily as if he were undoing his own. Mindful that someone could still come by and that they were in the most commonly-used room in the house besides the kitchen, Draco's fingers deftly slid Harry's cock out of his boxers and began to stroke nonetheless. Harry's breath exhaled harder into Draco's mouth, and he arched up into Draco's hands. His arse was warm against Draco's hardness, and Draco *needed* him.

"Fuck me," Harry breathed, his mouth still on Draco's.

Draco's hands stilled for a moment. "Like *this*?"

"Yeah. Like this."

"Lube," Draco said practically, despite being unable to form complete sentences at the moment.

"Fuck the lube." Harry bit at Draco's chin. "Improvise. We must know *some* sort of spell that would do it. Wait, I know. I don't know if I can do it wandlessly, but - "

"*Try*," Draco managed, rubbing harder.

Harry groaned and stuttered something that Draco didn't hear. "No, that didn't - there. Okay."

Draco made a note to ask him, later, what that spell was, but now was not the time. Harry was reaching behind him with both arms, fumbling at Draco's zip, distracted by Draco's hands on his hard cock. "Just let me," Draco said, and dealt with his jeans as best he could, shoving them down just far enough to be out of the way. He put his hands on Harry's hips. "Ready?"

"Yeah." Harry lifted his hips and tried his best to suspend his weight while Draco positioned them together. There - his cock was at Harry's entrance, and he let Harry's weight do the rest. They both groaned as their bodies slid together, like puzzle pieces. "Fuck," Harry said breathlessly. "Draco - "

Draco's mouth closed over his again, and he resumed the hand job. It was a bit difficult, finding a rhythm to move in this way, but they found it. Harry would rock forward a bit and Draco would push to meet him coming back. It felt amazing, and the fact that he didn't have complete control over the speed or timing of his thrusts gave it an added element of unexpectedness and anticipation. And neediness. They were hardly moving, just separating enough to move together again. Draco had one hand on Harry's hip and the other on his cock, jerking back and forth while Harry gasped into his mouth. The ecstasy was there, the edges of it starting to blur Draco's perceptions, its sweetness rising through him, swirling up from the depths of his balls to the tip of his cock, thrusting into Harry's body - Draco's body jerked against Harry's for a long second, his breath held as his abdomen clenched, and he felt Harry's come on his hand as though his cock was a direct extension of Draco's, through his body as Draco's cock spurted hotly inside him. They were gasping and breathing the same breath, passed back and forth, bodies heaving as their mouths fought to stay together. Harry reached one hand up to lay against Draco's cheek, and Draco could feel Harry's pulse racing, matching his own, through the hot palm.

A throat clearing pointedly alerted Draco to the fact that they were not alone. Startled, he broke off the kiss and looked up. Snape was standing in the doorway, smirking in a combination of amusement and disgust. Lupin could just be seen, hovering somewhere behind him in the hallway. A wave of hot embarrassment rolled over Draco - surely he had just seen them kissing.

No one could tell, with the blanket there, that his hand was still on Harry's softening cock, fingers resting gently on his lover's balls, or that his own cock was still buried inside Harry. It couldn't be obvious from their position, could it?

"I suggest," Snape said, the amusement growing more pronounced, "that you move this elsewhere."

Harry groaned and put one hand over his eyes.

"Severus," Lupin's voice said, from the hallway behind him, and there was a note of cajoling in his voice. "Let them be. Come on."

To their mutual disbelief, Snape allowed himself to be pulled away by the hand on his shoulder. Still frozen, Draco just listened, Harry rigid against him. They heard the sounds of two pairs of footsteps going up into the rest of the house, and Draco let out his breath. "Gods," he said. "That was awkward."

Harry laughed suddenly. "I can't believe it, though!" he exclaimed. "Snape's getting laid!"

Draco let out an undignified snort of laughter as well.

"And it's not like they could *tell*," Harry added practically. He twisted around to look at Draco over his shoulder. "Do you want to go to our room now?"

"Yeah," Draco said. They disentangled and reassembled themselves, and Harry took his hand and led him upstairs.

* * *

Later, Draco would remember that night as having been one of their best. They didn't sleep much, but talked and laughed and made love until dawn, just managing to keep the edge of fear back, always there in the peripheral, but never coming forth outright to spoil things. There were lots of things that they didn't talk about, or not very much, at least. Lucius. Zabini. The spy at the Ministry. Neither of them wanted to, so they left all of it alone and talked about more pleasant things.

Harry's next letters were full of the same warm, indefinable spirit, and Draco tried his best to write back in the same manner, to keep the mood going. It was like another dimension that he lived in whenever his attention wasn't directly required for whatever he was doing at the moment. And that was good, because what he was doing was getting steadily more dangerous, and he needed all the mental respite he could get. By tacit agreement, they stopped talking about their assignments except when something big happened. Little scraps were enough, and neither wanted to worry the other. They only spoke of "incidents", and only did so once the danger had passed, at least for the moment. Draco kept Harry's letters in his back pocket, always burning the one just before it, unless he couldn't bear to. There were little bits of parchment he'd kept, for certain sentences and words that were so full of Harry that reading them was almost like being with him.

Snape had merely told him that it was a weakness, to love, and had refused to talk any further on the subject. Not that Draco had ever expected him to. The man was obviously dealing with the fact that he was truly in love for the first time in his life, and it was hard for him. Draco understood, and left him alone. Slytherins weren't ones to talk about such things, anyway.

Draco kept his eyes on the horizon and waited for dawn.

A/N: Drop me a line & tell me what you thought, if you would. :)

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Chapter: 28

Chapter 28: The Storm Breaks

The weeks that followed had a nightmarish quality to them. Draco and his team pursued the Death Eaters they'd stumbled into in Perth relentlessly, or rather one Death Eater in particular - aided and abetted by Snape's blood-tracing potion. Thanks to Draco's donation, that last night at Grimmauld Place weeks before, the potion worked excellently. They followed Lucius to clandestine meetings with other Death Eaters in cafés, pubs and restaurants, to full-fledged Death Eater gatherings, and beyond. Draco knew where the bastard slept, most nights.

They hadn't been given permission to attack. Merely the same instructions, to track. Snape sent his reports in the deeps of the night, always changing owls, sometimes so heavily warded that they could hardly gain the night air. He spoke little, to anyone. They all did, withdrawing more and more into themselves. The twins spoke mostly to each other, their formerly inexhaustible humour finally wearing thin in their own weariness. The assignment had gone on for weeks. They'd had one brief night at Grimmauld Place, arriving late in the night and leaving at first light. Harry had not been there.

He still wrote regularly, and the scraps in Draco's back pocket became almost a lifeline. After that visit, Snape had sat down near him one day, bringing out his pipe.

"You alright?" he had asked finally, once the challenging business of lighting a pipe facing the wind had been dealt with.

Draco flinched. "Of course," he'd said tersely. "Why shouldn't I be?"

Snape puffed. "I know he wasn't there. Last night, I mean."

Draco let out his breath slowly. "I just wish I knew where he was."

"I presume he cannot tell you."

"You presume correctly."

"But he still writes, does he not?"

"Sure," Draco'd said, acutely aware of the most recent wad of parchment in his back pocket. "Does Lupin write to you?"

Snape shifted. "Sometimes. I am not much of a correspondent myself, however."

Draco had rolled his eyes. "Tell me you at least write back."

"I do," Snape had said. "Albeit, briefly."

"Did you see him last night?"

Snape had smiled and blown a smoke ring, saying nothing.

Draco made a dissatisfied noise. "At least *one* of us got some action, then."

"Please refrain from being crude."

"Well, at least you know what it's like for me now," Draco had griped. "And I'm not even talking about the emotional part."

Snape had sighed, a long, smoky sigh. "I am beginning to understand," he'd said soberly.

* * *

They were somewhere near Blair Atholl; for some strange reason, the Death Eaters seemed to prefer being near sources of water and had stayed roughly close to the Tay. Snape had a theory involving them drawing on the water for power, but didn't bother looking into any further. It wasn't necessary. They'd pitched camp here, with plans to eat and talk over the most recent findings. Hedwig was there, too, having just brought a letter, and Draco wanted to read it and reply before supper. The light was already failing, though, so he made it quick.

"George. I'll just be here," Draco said, nodding in the direction he planned to go.

George nodded, looking tense. "Don't go far," he said.

"I won't. I'll stay in sight."

"Be sure that you do," Snape said then, emerging from their tent.

Draco walked a short distance away and sat down, Hedwig on his arm. She brought out the letter, and his fumbling fingers almost ripped it in the effort of opening it quickly. Harry's writing was more scrawling than usual, leading Draco to suspect that he'd written it in a hurry.

Dear Draco,

Things here are getting crazy. Crazier, I should say. We're no closer to finding out what we need to know, but the M. has evacuated at last. Theories about tunnels, et al. Wish I could tell you more, but there isn't time and it isn't safe.

I heard a disturbing rumour that things are getting very dangerous where you are. I hope you're not taking any risks you don't need to. Stupid advice, in the middle of a war, I know, but I have to say it.

I miss you so much it makes my guts hurt. Speaking of which, I got cursed the other day - can't say more, but it's alright now. My ribs are still a little sore, but at least I've stopped being sick. H is invaluable some days. I haven't been back to HQ in over a week, and that was just for a meeting. Have you been there recently? I spend an unhealthy amount of time thinking about you and wishing we were both there again. And that all this was over and done with.

Should anything happen to me during all this, Draco - I want you to know that I love you and I always will. I know I used to say it too often anyway, but something prompted me to say it again. Sometimes maybe we shouldn't question these things. I want nothing more for this to end and for us to finally have a happily-ever-after. I will always be yours.

Harry.

Draco's hands were shaking. Harry's tone was uncharacteristically dark and desperate-sounding, and he wondered if his lover knew more than he was letting on about the events over at his end of things. Hedwig hooted softly. Draco started; he'd forgotten she was there. He looked over at her and stroked her head softly. She nipped very gently at his finger, and a sharp lump came into Draco's throat for no apparent reason. "I should write back," he said softly, his voice quavering slightly.

Hedwig blinked and waited expectantly. Draco took his pack out of his pocket and enlarged it, drawing out a quill, ink, a book to write on, and a spare piece of parchment of his steadily-dwindling supply. He dipped his quill in the ink and wrote his answer.

Dear Harry,

Things here are under control, don't worry. I know you will and that it's no use to tell you not to, but try, alright? I'd really like to know who cursed you and how that came about, but I know it isn't safe for you to tell me. I can't see how that happened at the M., especially if you still don't know who's behind it all. Did you not see whoever it was? I can't believe they were forced to evacuate, after all that effort. Tunnels?!

We found more today, not just the one we're tracing. Full-scale meetings are scary, trust me. I thought I saw some people we both know, our age. It wasn't pleasant. I suspect that the heat is about to break, that the battles will start any day now. And I worry, because I'm sure you'll be right in the middle of it all. Please try to restrain your innate Gryffindor-ness, okay? Just do what you need to do and no more. I want a future, not a martyr.

I can't hear it often enough. Don't worry about that. I love you more than I have words to tell you, with all of my being. I'll always be yours, too.

Draco.

The tightness in his throat hadn't gone. Draco waited for the ink to dry, then folded the parchment and gave it to Hedwig. "Thank you," he said, his voice still low. Hiding from the emotion. She hooted and tucked the letter under her (brown) wing. Draco was starting to wonder if he'd still recognize her white, once this was all over. He gave her another affectionate pet. "Do you need some more water before you go?"

A shake of the feathers told him she did not. Hedwig fluttered one wing over his face in farewell, and took off, keeping low to the ground. Draco, as always, watched her until she was out of sight. The heaviness in his chest not abating, he stood up, stiffly, and made his way back to the covered fire that Snape was attending.

* * *

Draco felt Snape's hand on his elbow and knew they'd stayed long enough. Lucius' voice was too low to be heard, even with copious amounts of magnifying spells cast from a cautious distance. They weren't going to get anything. He crawled back through the scrubby underbrush after Snape. Fred looked very relieved to see them both, and gave George the all-clear. The four of them Disapparated, back to the last place they'd camped.

* * *

The next day, Fred joined Draco at the smokeless fire. "Snape got an owl from Lupin," he said tonelessly.

Normally, this was a cause of great delight to the twins. Or rather, more subdued delight as of late, but still delight. "Oh?" Draco asked, not caring. He stirred the stew with little interest. He was sick of stew and had been almost since the beginning.

"Yeah. The war's broken out," Fred told him heavily.

Draco's jaw tightened. "Fuck."

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"Right in London. Apparently there've been tunnels under the Ministry, under Gringotts, and under Diagon Alley for months, and nobody could find them. They even tapped into the London Underground."

Draco tried to digest this. He had no idea what Harry's part in that might be, and it was so frustrating that he couldn't bear to think about it at all.

Fred's expression softened a little. "Want me to do that?"

"No. Just talk about something else."

"Right." Fred's tone was brisk, and he called George over. Try as they might, though, all attempts at conversation failed. Snape joined them silently, and they ate in silence, as well.

* * *

"Malfoy," Snape said, two days later, as they were switching watch in the middle of the night, "how long has it been since you have had an owl?"

"From Harry, you mean?" Draco asked, his eyes itching, wanting to get to bed. He rubbed them tiredly and wanted to evade the question.

"Yes. From Harry." Snape's eyes were sharp.

"Ten days," Draco said, his jaw tight.

Snape paused. "That is… rather longer than usual, is it not?"

Draco tried to make himself swallow, but his mouth was too dry. "About five days longer, yeah. I don't really want to talk about this, okay?"

Snape nodded then, too quickly. "I'm sorry."

Draco turned to go. As he crouched to crawl into their horribly tiny tent, Snape's voice called him back. He turned. "What?"

Snape stood and walked over to him. He seemed not quite sure what to say, but his expression was urgent. A hand was placed on Draco's shoulder, and he looked at it. "You are like - well, if not a son, then at least a nephew or something, to me," Snape said, the words coming out awkwardly and too fast. "If you ever need to talk about it - I know it sounds dreadfully un-Slytherin - but you know you can speak with me. Yes?"

Draco hesitated. "Yes. I know that."

There was another pause, and then Draco found himself drawn into a rough embrace, the scratchy material of Snape's robes chafing his chin. He let go before Snape did, gently pulling away and giving him an awkward smile. It was the closest he could bring himself to saying thank you.

* * *

Fifteen days since Harry's last letter, and Draco's nerves were practically popping through his skin. The twins and Snape very tactfully avoided any and all mentions of London or the battles. They didn't have any news to go on, anyway. Snape had had them stop in a village to borrow and owl, but it turned out to be a muggle village. They searched until they'd found a town that had a magical community, and Snape owled Dumbledore, asking if they could come back for a brief rest. And for news.

Two days later, no reply had come. All Draco knew was that he'd been on watch, alone as usual, in the dead of the night. He never heard anyone approaching, but the last thing he remembered seeing, later, was a black-gloved hand descending in front of his face, holding something there

that made him extremely sleepy. He passed out before he'd even had a chance to go for his wand.

* * *

Snape woke suddenly in the night. Something felt off, but he couldn't put his finger on it. The tents were spelled with a ward which made them undetectable as well as invisible, except to the four of them, so safety was not a direct concern. What was it, then? The answer came to Snape with a jolt - it was too late. He had slept too long; Malfoy should have woken him by now, spelled him off for the watch. Alarmed, Snape checked his antique pocket watch - yes, Malfoy was two hours late. Perhaps he had fallen asleep.

His instincts told him otherwise, however; Malfoy had never once fallen asleep on his watch. He had to admit that even the twins had been remarkable in that aspect. Snape jerked open the zipper to his tent and staggered out into the night.

The fire was out, and Malfoy was nowhere in sight. Frantic, but already knowing the truth in his gut, Snape took several steps away from the fire pit. "Malfoy!" he hissed. Gods, if Malfoy had simply gone to relieve himself and had fallen asleep *there* or something, Snape would shake him so hard his teeth rattled - but he knew this was not the case. "Malfoy!"

Fucking *hell*. Snatched by Death Eaters under his very nose. Snape cursed violently and went to wake the twins.

* * *

Draco thought he might have woken several times before they allowed him to wake for real. Each time was so much like the nightmares that it was difficult to distinguish between the dreams and the horrific reality that his fate had finally caught up to him. He was in enemy hands, and, if his drug-addled mind suspected correctly, all-too-familiar hands. *The potion, it had to have been the potion. Lucius had caught wind of it, somehow. Perhaps he would never know, now.*

And he realized, too, that he still had Harry's last letter on him. The last paragraph, along with a few tiny, wrinkled bits from older letters. The rest, he'd burned. But the last few lines had meant too much to him for Draco to willfully set fire to. Had he been searched already? He could handle a lot; he knew he had some strength, at least, to face torture - but he wanted that bit of parchment far more than he should.

Draco's consciousness returned slowly, and he opened his eyes. "Where am I?" he asked, his voice cracked and dry. *How long had he been out of it?*

"Do you not know?" A honeyed voice was speaking, smoother than silk, amusement threading through it.

Draco blinked and struggled to raise his head, only to find that not only were his limbs bound, but there were also heavy bands across his chest and neck. He could not see his father, but knew it was he. "Lucius."

"Very good, boy. Tell me where you are." The amusement grew.

Draco stared at the ceiling. It was made entirely of dark-grey granite. He'd seen it before. His brain worked frantically to put two and two together before the crushing truth hit him. "I'm at the Manor. In the dungeons."

"Very good," Lucius said again. "Are you thirsty?"

Draco hesitated. It was almost certain that they would have drugged anything they would willingly give him, but his thirst was overpowering. "Are you going to drug me again?"

"Only a little. Rabastan." The last was a command, and a masked Death Eater came to hover over Draco, holding a cup to his lips, jerking his head up roughly, the strap cutting into his throat. Draco drank as much as he could get, though the sips choked him and the water spilled over and trickled down his neck. Lestrange let Draco's head drop with a thunk against the slab to which he was bound.

Lucius stood then, and came over. "Leave him," he said to Lestrange, who retreated silently. Lucius was unmasked, dressed as Draco had always seen him. Flowing black dress robes, adorned with silver metalwork, his long, blond hair cascading down his shoulders. Eyes colder than ice, and yes, the wrinkles around them had deepened indeed. Lines of power, power which was currently inducing greater amounts of fear into Draco than he cared to think about.

A gloved hand came out and touched his cheek. Draco jerked away, reflexively. The touch was

mockingly tender. "To think it would come to this," Lucius said pensively. "That I would be forced to kill my own flesh and blood."

Draco refused to look at him.

"I disowned you, I know," Lucius went on, in that same, almost wistful tone. "But it cannot change the fact that your blood is my blood."

"The fuck it is," Draco snarled. "My blood is my own."

That earned him a stinging slap across the face. "Do not speak until spoken to," Lucius said, the ghost of ten years of childhood echoing in his tone. "But your face has changed," his father went on, resuming the dreamy tone. "Weaker and stronger all at once. Tell me, boy, do you know your weakness?"

Draco felt the urgings of Veritaserum prompting him, and struggled to find a way out of answering directly. "Yes."

"What are they?"

The pressure bore down against his cranium - "I let myself - care - about people," Draco said, fighting back the words.

"Who?" It was like a caress, so soft.

Draco fought for a long, silent moment. "Snape."

"Ah, yes. Snape," Lucius repeated thoughtfully. "Your Head of House."

"Yes."

"Whom else?"

Again, the struggle not to say Harry's name, not to even *think* it; thinking was dangerous. "Weasley twins," Draco managed.

Lucius bent over him. "You are not telling me the full truth," he said, his dangerous voice just above a whisper. "You will learn."

Draco managed not to respond to that.

Lucius snapped his fingers, and four Death Eaters came forward from the shadows, all masked. Lucius departed, and they proceeded to beat Draco with whips, chains and a blunt object of some sort; Draco never got a close look at it. Nothing was sacred; by squeezing his eyes shut, he felt the worst of the damage avoid his eyes. The first time he cried out was when a whiplash fell across the top of his thigh, just catching the base of his balls through his jeans. Thank the gods he was still clothed - this time, at least. Draco wondered in passing whether the *DA* logo on his t-shirt was still undetectable, but it was one of the last thoughts he had before the pain took him and he passed out again.

* * *

The next time he woke, it was because a potion of some sort was being forced down his throat. "Wake up," a rough voice said. An unfamiliar voice.

Draco managed to open his eyes. His face felt puffy, and he remembered the beating. Testing the restraints, he found that his body and limbs were still bound. Pain oozed from most points of his flesh; a wetness on one knee suggested that something was still bleeding; his chest must be crossed over with red welts from the whips, and his arms ached.

Lucius was there again. "Let's try this again," he said pleasantly. "Where is Dumbledore?"

Draco felt the dreaded prompt, but just managed to sidestep it. "I don't know."

"Where was he the last time you knew?"

"London," Draco said, against his will. He felt the Veritaserum warring with the Fidelius Charm

which prevented him from saying the name of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. The two powers pushed at his mind from either side. It made him nauseous, and he vomited, choking. One of the faceless Death Eaters came over and pushed his head up so that he wouldn't swallow it. The vomit itself remained, and he wasn't given anything to drink. "Water," he managed, his throat rasping.

"No." Lucius' tone was genial, even. "Where in London?"

The wave hit him again, but Draco managed to control it. "I - I don't know."

Lucius stood suddenly and lashed his cane over Draco's shins in a tempestuous spurt of violence. "Idiot boy! Do not think to deceive me!"

Draco, lying in his own filth, the taste and smell of it flooding his senses, could not respond, even to cry out in pain. Lucius retreated again. "That smell is sickening," he commented, and someone silently removed it. Draco could still taste it, though.

"Where is Severus Snape?" Lucius asked next, after a small pause.

Draco closed his eyes. It was true that he didn't know the name of the last place they'd been, mostly because they hadn't been *anywhere*; it was just another unfamiliar patch of Scotland. Somewhere in - *no, Draco, don't think in details*. He opened his eyes. "I don't know," he said, his voice neutral, though still hoarse.

Lucius stepped closer, a faint sneer on his aristocratic features. "Where is Harry Potter?"

"I don't know!" A tiny slice of panic fought through his words, but at the same time, a faint streak of hope came to him. If they were asking, perhaps they didn't have him yet. Unless Lucius was just testing him.

Lucius didn't back away. "What was your relationship with him?" he asked softly.

Think in abstracts. "I went to Hogwarts with him," Draco said, briefly meeting his father's eyes.

"Have you seen him since your graduation?"

Hesitation. Draco was about to try his hand at denying it, though the Veritaserum's pressure was growing untenable - and Lucius' cane crashed down on his shins again. "Ah! N - n - yes!" *Fuck.*

The smile was cold and cruel. "Tell me," Lucius said softly, "does he mean more than the average Order member to you, Draco?"

It was the first time Lucius had used his name, and Draco couldn't repress the shudder that ran through him. The potion pushed at his mind, supplying the correct answer. Draco drew upon all of his strength and looked his father in the eye. "No," he said flatly, hating the lie, and lost consciousness again.

* * *

The nightmares grew stranger and stranger, dark and twisted and waking was sometimes little relief. The questions were repeated over and over again: *Where is Dumbledore? Where are the Headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix? Where is Harry Potter?* Draco was successfully resisting them all, thankful in a way that Snape *hadn't* gotten any news from Dumbledore before he'd been captured. He thought of Snape and hoped he was alright. Wondered, more frequently, if anyone would ever find out what had happened to him.

The ironies of dying in his father's house, the house he'd grown up in, were a little too much to bear.

* * *

Draco was being prodded awake again. The cold voice told him that it was Dolohov, which made his blood run cold. Silently, Dolohov's mask came closer, and a cup of potion was held to Draco's lips. He shook his head and tried to refuse it, but another Death Eater, who hadn't spoken to give his identity away, drove a burning brand into Draco's side. He screamed and Dolohov forced the potion into his mouth. "Swallow," the ice-cold voice hissed, "or you will pay for your folly."

Draco swallowed, and a dizzying wave of hallucinations swirled around him. Only the gods knew what they were giving him and what the long-term effects would be to his mind. He'd

heard rumours that the Death Eaters were using "experimental" potions these days; it was something he'd never hoped to substantiate through experience. Voices were speaking in his head, and Draco was having trouble sifting truth from fantasy.

Dolohov was asking something, but all Draco could do was let his head fall back and grin, a wide, gaping leer that he had not intended at all.

Another potion was forced into his mouth, and everything went dark again.

* * *

The dark shapes were all around him, their shadows weirdly elongated against the hills. Draco wasn't sure if he was part of it all, or if he was, perhaps, the fire in the center - there were shapes dancing everywhere, a dark, sinister circle of movement, and the movement was a spell in and of itself, and the sweet darkness was wrapping around his limbs like cords - and Draco was so hot, so hot, he was burning and the cords were bursting into flame against the heat of his skin - and he could see his hands now, and they had turned black - Draco screamed, and could not stop screaming.

The voice wasn't even his own; it was a high, thin wail - he thought of the Nazgul; were they a myth, something he'd read as a child, or was this the reality? Draco's head spun and he was no longer certain that he was corporeally present within the strange scene - everything was swirling away from him, and he was drowning, drowning in the blackness and the fire -

* * *

Later, Draco couldn't remember if this was one of the dreams, or if he'd regained consciousness for a bit. He suspected it had happened, though. Lucius was standing in front of him.

"Tell me about Harry Potter," he said calmly.

Draco felt the trickle of dried blood at the corner of his mouth crack as he tried to work enough moisture into his mouth to speak. "No." It came out in a rasp.

Lucius was circling, tapping the switch against his thigh. "There is no need to lie, you know. I

know everything."

Draco closed his eyes and thought of Harry for one long moment. "There's no way you can know everything."

"You have spoken about him in your sleep. And besides, I have these." Lucius came near, and brandished a handful of parchment scraps at Draco.

Fury swelled in his chest and choked him. "*Give me those*," Draco said, summoning all the steel he could muster into his voice.

A cold smile. "No."

He didn't want Lucius *touching* them. It didn't matter, he was going to die anyway, but he wanted to die with his letters, or pieces of letters. It was the closest he would likely ever be to Harry again. Draco swallowed. "Give them back," he said again, and heard the fury trembling in his voice. He was too weak; he had no means of controlling it any more.

Lucius smiled again, and put them back into his pocket. He didn't answer, except to strike Draco across the temple with the hard head of his cane, so fast that Draco never even saw it coming. The next time he woke, Lucius was gone.

* * *

The dragons were snarling, their fire eating his skin, and Draco couldn't see himself, see whether he was in the air above the entire scene, or whether that figure in the fire was him. He was shaking; he could feel it. The tremors attracted the flames, kept them pinned to his dissolving flesh, and Draco was screaming again -

* * *

"Wake up."

It was a command, and Draco's body obeyed. He felt as though he'd been dreaming forever.

Strange, terrible things. A cup was held to his lips by a dark-gloved hand, and Draco drank and clutched at the hand all at once. The cup was withdrawn, and he was babbling. "Don't make me sleep again. Please. I don't know the answers to your questions, please don't do that to me again."

He was shaking, nearing spasm, and Lucius' gloved hand stroked his sweat-streaked hair. "No, you didn't like that one, did you?" he asked. "Tell me, do you know what day it is? Do you know how long you've been here?"

There was no prompt in his mind; perhaps the water had just been water this time. Draco struggled with the answer. "No," he said eventually, truthfully. "Are you going to tell me?"

Amusement. "No." Lucius drew away.

His entire body ached; had they beaten him again while he'd been out? He'd lost count after the twelfth beating or so. Draco was starving, he knew that much. But he'd been starving the last time he'd woken up, too. "Are you going to let me eat?"

"Why would I do that?"

It was a rhetorical question, and Draco knew better than to try answering it. "Am I going to die soon?" he asked instead, his voice going soft.

Lucius whispered a spell and released the strap binding Draco's neck. "Do you want to?" A Death Eater came forward, presumably at Lucius' command, and slid a thin pillow under Draco's head. It was almost blissful.

"No."

"What do you have to live for?" Lucius asked, shaking his head and smiling.

Draco knew, but he couldn't abide the answer. Not like this. He struggled to contain his emotions, but he was still shaking horribly, and wished he could stop. He wasn't cold, exactly, but he wasn't warm, either. His nervous system had gone into hyper mode, and seemed to be responding violently to every stimulus.

When he didn't answer, Lucius' tone changed. "You have a visitor," he said. "I would suggest you try being a little more polite than you've been with me thus far. Especially if you really do want to live."

He left, snapping his fingers, and all the other Death Eaters in the torture chamber left with him. A clenching in Draco's abdomen told him precisely who his next guest would be.

Without preamble, Voldemort strolled into the room.

Draco had never seen him before. Once, back at training camp, he'd asked Harry to tell him what Voldemort looked like. Harry had shivered and said he didn't want to talk about it. Now Draco knew why. The sight alone was terrifying. Every detail of the face spoke of malice and ill-intent, power corrupted and consuming. The eyes were the worst, glowing and making Draco feel as though the other could see directly through him and into his soul. He grasped after his senses, his memories - anything to give him some thread of courage to face this interview.

Harry. Harry is more powerful than he is.

Draco breathed again. It didn't change the fact that he was facing the Dark Lord at last, and that his death was very likely imminent. Now, all he wanted was to believe that Harry would defeat this monster. Because he knew for a fact that no one else would. He also knew that the Malfoy dungeons were wholly inescapable, and that he would almost without a doubt never see the light of day again. "What do you want?" he asked, his voice cracking but defiant.

Voldemort chuckled, and it was chilling. "My young Master Malfoy," he hissed. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance at last. Allow me to convey my disappointment at having had to meet you under these circumstances."

"Skip the small talk," Draco said rudely.

The eyes narrowed a little. "I would prefer a little more courtesy," Voldemort said. He came closer and laid one hand on Draco's battered right knee. It was cold, and Draco couldn't help wincing. The touch was like a cold burn, sizzling into his flesh. "Let us begin with a few simple questions. Do not attempt to lie. Lord Voldemort always knows, my defiant, young master."

His stare bored into Draco's, and Draco forced himself to look away. Resist eye contact; that's what they'd been told. It was no surprise when Voldemort leaned over him and forced Draco's face back to his. He shut his eyes tightly.

"It does no good, you know," Voldemort whispered. "I see past those thin, flimsy layers of skin. Tell me, Master Malfoy, where is Albus Dumbledore?"

Draco opened his eyes and slid them to the side, as far as they would go. "I don't know. They've already asked me that, thousands of times."

"And other times, you have said London, have you not? But you cannot possibly be expected to know that, not now." Voldemort's tone grew practical. "After all, you have been locked up for weeks, have you not?"

Was it *weeks* already? Draco was horrified, but had no way of knowing whether it was true or just something Voldemort was saying. Snape had to be frantic, and if Harry knew - if Harry was still alive, that was -

"Tell me this," Voldemort said, his voice dropping and becoming somewhat hypnotical. "Tell me where Harry Potter is, and I will let you live."

"I don't know where he is." *Thank the gods.*

"You should," Voldemort sneered, his tone triumphant. "I doubt it would bring you much pleasure."

He backed away, and Draco looked at him. "Why? Where is he?"

Voldemort's smile grew extremely cruel in its pleasure, and he said nothing. *It's a bluff*, Draco told himself fiercely. *They can't have him. They don't. They won't. Harry has to win this.*

"If the war had ended, you would never even know," Voldemort said gently. "Do you require proof?"

"Would you give it to me?" Draco asked harshly.

Voldemort continued to smile. "Tell me the spell to show the time," he said.

"*Tempus*," Draco answered automatically.

"And the date?"

"*Datus hodie*."

Voldemort withdrew a wand that looked suspiciously like Draco's own. "*Tempus*," he pronounced. The numbers appeared in the air. "There, you see. Half-past nine in the evening. *Datus hodie*. The twelfth of November. Does that fit your calculations?"

Draco bent his mind into the task of remembering the date of his abduction. Shit. It had been mid- to late-October; that much he remembered. He *had* been here for weeks. *And no one had found him yet.* An even colder realization sank into his belly. *No one was* going *to find him.*

"Just for your information," Voldemort said lazily, "perhaps you do not realize it, but even if I were to return your wand to you now, you would likely find it useless. You are weaker than you know. I doubt very much that you could walk, if released." He came nearer, stowing Draco's wand back into some fold of robe or other, and brought out something else. "Do you know what I have?" he asked, the triumph returning.

"What?" Draco asked numbly.

"I will show you." Voldemort unfolded a piece of parchment that had been folded into a square. "Listen: *'Dear Draco, the war broke out at last. Diagon Alley is under attack and everything has gone completely mad. No one can keep track of who's dead and who's still alive, who's missing and where they've gone - our troops are helpless. I hope you get this owl, but maybe it would be best if you didn't respond, I want Hedwig to keep out of the way. It looks like I won't be fighting much, unless D sees a chance for me to get near my target. H and R are out there, but not on the front lines, thanks be. I have to make this short; I'm needed, apparently. Don't ever forget that I love you. Harry.'*"

Voldemort stopped reading, his eyes glittering strangely. "A funny thing, love," he said. "Ironic that it betrayed your lover. This was taken from his body. Do you recognize the writing?" He held the parchment out for Draco to see, and there could be no denying that it was Harry's familiar scrawl.

Draco felt his chest tightening, and couldn't breathe. *No. It couldn't be.* "Then why were you asking me where Dumbledore is?" he managed to get out.

"Revenge," Voldemort said simply. He turned and went to the door. "The war is over, *mon enfant*."

No!!!!!

The scream tore through Draco's still-hazy mind, even as he worked frantically to find a loop-hole somewhere, anywhere. The letter could have been intercepted. Harry might not have been captured. But then why the casualty of Voldemort's visit and tone? On the other hand, why had he come at all? But if it was true, if Harry was really dead - then Lucius was right; Draco had nothing to live for. He couldn't process this concept, though; his mind felt as shaky as his limbs, his nerves, his breath. He had to know. That was all. And if was true -

It felt true.

Someone came in then and put him mercifully back to sleep. Draco didn't even try to argue this time.

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Chapter: 29

Chapter 29: The Fading of the Thunder

Draco's mouth was dryer than sand. How long had it been since the day of Voldemort's visit? He no longer trusted his sense of time, but it couldn't have been all that long ago. Two days, perhaps. Things had gotten very quiet. No one had questioned him since that visit. It was a relief, but part

of him was also worried that they had lost interest in him and were simply going to leave him to die.

Given a choice, he'd prefer being beaten to death.

Every so often, when awake at least, Draco would stretch out his fingers and try to move his toes in a weak effort to keep some semblance of circulation going. It was hard to tell if it was making any difference. His hands shook continually now, and sometimes the rest of him did, too. When the Death Eaters *were* there, they always made sure to prod him, see how he flinched or twisted away. They hadn't spoken to him in days.

One day, he heard his father's voice outside the entrance to his chamber. Draco couldn't tell who he was talking to, exactly, but he listened intently. The voice faded in and out, and Draco didn't know whether it was Lucius' voice or his own, faulty senses that were wavering.

"… orders to join our Lord at… strengthened the wards around the Manor… a hole behind the old well… orchard fence… Dumbledore… "

What was it they'd said about Dumbledore? Draco strained harder, but the voices faded altogether and were gone.

* * *

Later, Lucius returned, his face colder and more set than ever. "Have you anything new to say?" he demanded.

Draco shook his head, helplessly. "No." His voice was no more than a whisper.

Lucius picked up a silver flagon and brought it to him. "It is only water, you foolish, cowardly boy," he sneered, when Draco's eyes widened, his lips compressing tightly. "I would drink it if I were you. It's been three days since you've had any fluids. Drink."

The edge of the little pitcher was cutting into Draco's lower lip. He gave in and allowed Lucius to force-feed it to him. He was desperately thirsty, almost to the point that he would drink their damnable potions again, if it meant getting a little water with it. And how long since he had

eaten? He was hungry, terribly so, but surely they had given him *something* at some point before this? He remembered the stale crackers in his pack and wondered what had become of it. Surely it wasn't still in his pocket. No. Not if they had discovered his letters.

Lucius pulled the water away and set it down. "Wonderful," he said, his features twisting unpleasantly. "This is the last thing I have for you." With that, he raised his cane and proceeded to batter Draco until the darkness took him again.

* * *

He was dreaming, and some part of his mind was still able to recognize it. Which was a mercy.

The field was littered with bodies, but there was only one that Harry was interested in. He knelt at the old man's side and bent low to listen for breath. "Dumbledore!"

Eyelids, thin as paper, fluttered open. "Harry." The voice was thin and cracked. He lifted one tremulous hand, but didn't appear to know what to do with it.

"Are you alright?"

"Is he… Voldemort… is he dead?"

Harry ignored the question. "You don't look good," he said matter-of-factly. "I should get someone."

"Harry… " Now the hand clutched at the sleeve of Harry's worn t-shirt. "You must tell me."

Harry looked steadily at him, then nodded. "It's over," he said. "I have to find Draco now."

A shadow passed over Dumbledore's face; was it grief? "It has been weeks since his disappearance," the old wizard said. "I do not think he could be - "

"Then I will find his body," Harry said, his face stony, his tone as hard as Draco had ever heard

it. "But if I never find him - if it's because you wouldn't let me search, before - if he died while this was happening, then I'll never forgive you."

The words almost swirled away in the wind that was moaning low to the ground, raising up clouds of very fine dust, coating the grass. Dumbledore's face was stricken, the lines deeper than he'd ever seen before - all of his many years had finally caught up to him and were sinking into his flesh at last - "I'm sorry, Harry, so sorry," Dumbledore said, his voice growing weaker yet. "I did what I had to do."

Harry studied him for a long time, obviously struggling with his control. "I know you did. You saved the world. You won my life back," he said, his voice trembling. "But I don't want a life without him. Do you understand that yet?"

Dumbledore coughed; it was a sound like brittle leaves rustling. He coughed again, and Harry tried to help him sit up, but Dumbledore raised a hand, preventing him.

A few moments passed in silence, but for the wind. After a bit, Harry bent close to the old man again. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

But by then, Draco knew that Dumbledore was dead.

Harry realized it then, too. "Dumbledore!" His voice cracked. "Oh, gods… no, Dumbledore, please - " He bowed low over the form, sobs tearing from his throat and splitting the air like thunder.

* * *

When Draco woke, everything was silent. Not a breath stirred the dank, lifeless air of his chamber. It was rather miraculous, he thought, upon gingerly testing his limbs, that he'd woken at all, really. He could still feel cold moisture at many points, which told him that there was open bleeding still. The pain was considerable.

After many minutes, it occurred to Draco that he was actually alone. It had happened; they had deserted him. Who knew when they were coming back, if at all?

He pushed with his chest against the band across it, tugging at the wrist bands as he had done many a time already. To his vast surprise, his right wrist snapped free. Shocked, Draco lay very still and listened. Had it been spelled to set off an alarm if he managed to free himself at any point?

There was nothing, save the thumping of his own heartbeat against his eardrums.

Draco scrabbled at the band on his chest and managed to pull it free. His left wrist and ankles followed with more difficulty, but after many nearly silent moments of struggle, Draco had freed himself. Attempting to sit up was something of a hurdle. He managed it, though, and looked down at himself. And was almost sick with horror. His jeans were torn open in places and blood-stained, fresh puddles mingling with gooey clusters and clots from previous wounds. One of his ankles was so swollen that he suspected it was very badly sprained. From his own futile attempts to evade the blows, perhaps? Draco surveyed his arms and chest. It was little better, really, and the feeling of his own face was almost novel after all this time. One of his eyes was puffy and the vision a little unclear. Hopefully that would fade. His forehead was crusted over with scabbing and the dust of dried blood.

The one positive thing about having been lying on his back for weeks at a time was that that half of him was relatively unscathed. Now for it, then. Draco hopped to the floor and immediately collapsed. His heart was beating crazily, as though he'd been drugged on adrenaline. He was shakier than he'd even prepared himself to be, and it was with much effort that he managed to haul himself to his feet at all.

First things first. He'd have to find something to eat, and some water. The silver flagon was where Lucius had left it. Who knew if it was really just water, but without his wand, Draco couldn't conjure anything, anyway. Beggars couldn't be choosers. He limped across the room, supporting his weight against the slab to which he'd been bound for so long, then lunged at the water. He spilled quite a lot of it on his face in his haste to drink, but that was alright, too. Draco coughed and choked on it, but drank it all. Stopping afterwards to listen again, he still heard nothing. He proceeded to search for his belongings.

The heavy, wooden door to his chamber was still wide open. Draco peered around it, but surely someone would have heard him by now, if anyone had been there. It was empty. Draco spotted his pack, empty, and its contents, spread out across a table like a muggle scientist's specimens. Or a crime lab's evidence. His crackers had been smashed into powder, but what choice did he have? Draco made his slow, painful way to the table and knelt beside it, scooping the floury dust into his mouth. That made him cough, too, but he ate all there was of it. Perhaps ten crackers' worth, in total. It was something, at least.

After a few minutes, Draco felt sufficiently strengthened to go on. *Must practise walking by myself.* He did a few practise laps around the antechamber, and sat down, panting and sweating and shaking. *Okay, enough practise. Shouldn't tire myself out.*

He gripped the wall and dragged himself back to his feet after another few minutes. Time to exit the Manor. The journey upstairs was slow, punctuated by frequent stops to rest and to listen in fear. Unless the Death Eaters were playing some sort of elaborate joke on him, there was no one there. But. But. What if they had left a sentry or something, just to watch over him? Or had Lucius presumed that he'd die after the last beating?

Draco noticed that the bleeding in his right knee had started afresh, and cursed in his head. If only he had his wand. Well, he didn't, so nothing else to do but get out. Worry what to do next if he got that far. If he'd heard properly, the gap in the wards, assuming they were still in place, was behind the well in the North Eastern orchard. It was a long way from the house, and never mind what he'd do after that. Draco's thoughts were racing faster than they should be, even given that he was in the act of staging his own escape, and he knew it was the lingering effects of the potions. He didn't trust himself to Apparate. And where the hell was he to go, anyway? If the war was truly over, then the enemy would have taken Grimmauld Place. What about Hogwarts? If Dumbledore was still living, then surely he would be there, protecting the students.

And if not, then maybe the castle itself could protect *him* awhile longer. All Draco currently cared about was finding out. Whether the war was over or not, and if so, whether Harry was still alive. Or not. If not, then it all might as well be over now. Not only would it mean no Harry, it would mean that Voldemort had won. And they would hunt him down again.

No. He simply had to find out. His dream was still fresh in his mind, sharper than it should have been, and it frightened him. Who knew where it had even come from? Nothing else that he'd dreamed since his capture had made as much cohesive sense as that had. Draco hobbled up the last flight of stairs - *why* had Lucius put the dungeons four floors below the cellars, anyway? - and emerged onto the first floor. It was a shock.

It all looked so normal. Exactly as he remembered it, only with no parents, no servants, nothing. But the rooms were just the same. The quiet ticking of the grandfather clock in the sitting room could be heard from where Draco leaned against the doorframe of the cellar stairwell, its gentle noise the only sound permeating the rich, heavy atmosphere of wealth and privilege that had permeated Draco's former life. He closed his eyes. He could almost believe that past eight years had never happened at all.

"Master Draco!"

Draco nearly jumped out of his skin, his eyes flying open, his heartrate trebling. He clutched at his chest and searched for the source of the sound. Oh. Gods. It was only a house-elf. "Tandy," he said weakly, "you scared me." Which was something of a ludicrous understatement.

Draco surveyed her, cowering behind her hands, frightened by his reaction. This could be the deal-breaker right here. What if Lucius had specifically ordered her to look out for him? "It's alright, Tandy," Draco said, trying to sound calm. "Don't worry. You just startled me."

The hands lowered uncertainly. Large, timid eyes blinked at him. "Tandy is not meaning any harm!" she squeaked.

"No, of course you weren't," Draco said reassuringly. "Listen, is - is my father around?"

The frightened look return, and Tandy looked as though she were about to start beating herself. "Don't!" Draco said quickly. "Never mind. Don't tell me. But - could you help me a little?"

Tandy blinked. "What is Master Draco needing?" she asked, sounding very dubious. And very fearful.

"I think I have a sprained ankle," Draco said, grimacing as he set his weight on it again. "Is there any chance you could find me a bandage, or fix a splint or something?"

Relief. "Oh. Yes, Tandy is helping," the elf reassured him. She snapped her fingers and a roll of thick bandage sprang out of nowhere, binding itself around his ankle. It wasn't healed, but it was much better, and upon testing, proved to be quite helpful.

"Thank you," Draco said, smiling at her. Tandy beamed. "One more thing," Draco said. "I need to go to the kitchen and leave out that door. When we get there, could you get me a bottle of water and a bit of food?" He'd brought his empty pack up, full-sized and unshrinkable at present.

Tandy looked nervous, but agreed, and kept getting ahead of him on their way to the kitchen. Eventually, though, pale and clammy, Draco got there. Tandy had his water and a small package of what appeared to be dried meat and - oh, surprise - crackers - ready for him, and it was just a

matter of getting it into his pack. Draco was full of gratitude, but hadn't the energy to properly thank the elf. He tried his best, anyway. "Tandy," he said weakly, "thank you so much. You might have saved my life."

Tandy regarded him with wide eyes, her mouth sad. "Master Lucius is gone!" she said, sounding very frightened at the confession.

"And Master Draco is leaving," Draco assured her. "If Master Lucius comes back - please don't tell him you saw me. I forbid you to punish yourself over this."

"Thank you!" Tandy squealed. Another snap of her fingers, and a mess of money appeared in her hands, an assortment of muggle pound notes and a few gold Galleons. She pushed it at Draco and fled.

Touched and surprised, Draco didn't argue. Without a wand, he would need it. There was no way he could *hike* to Scotland from Wiltshire. Or even London. Not in his condition. He would have to get to a town and purchase a Floo trip or a portkey to Hogsmeade and go from there. If he remembered correctly, the Hogwarts wards prevented both Apparation and Floo both. You could Floo once inside the castle, but not Apparate even there. Draco pushed the scullery door open and closed it very carefully behind him.

It was very exposed, the trip from the house to the back of the orchard, and Draco couldn't help looking around nervously every few steps. The well was in sight now, though - he was almost there. Half afraid that Lucius had been lying about the gap in the wards, or that it had been staged for his benefit and consequent entrapment, Draco approached the fence with caution. Nothing sizzled when he touched, and no magical boundaries held him back. Draco slipped through the slats of the fence and nothing happened.

He turned to look back at the Manor, expecting to see its windows gleaming innocently in the distance. Instead, what Draco saw was… nothing at all, not even the fence he'd just climbed through. Apparently the Manor's wards had been adjusted sufficiently to hide the entire thing. Draco took three steps back toward the house, which should have had him running into the fence. Nothing happened. He turned and retraced his steps, not wanting to return or risk being trapped again, anyway. Draco cast the seemingly empty meadow a distrustful look, then hoisted his pack onto his shoulders and turned his back on it. It was time to go home.

* * *

He got about four miles, by his own estimation, before his body gave out. Draco rolled into a ditch and slept.

When he woke, he ate and drank, feeling slightly better than he had. Though Draco wished they hadn't smashed his potion samples; the healing ones would have been very nice about now. He could smell himself, and hated the fact. The Death Eaters had mercifully done something to deal with his bodily functions, but he still hadn't washed in weeks. He would have to find someplace to bathe.

Draco fought his way to his feet and began to walk again, bowed slightly under the light weight of his pack. A town. That was the top priority. Or a stream. Whichever came first.

The stream happened first. Draco tested it; it was very cold, and he shivered at the thought of exposing his fragile flesh to its bite. He settled on removing parts of his clothing and washing isolated bits of himself. Afterwards, he felt refreshed but thoroughly chilled. His hair was dripping and probably looked dreadful, but it didn't matter.

After another hour, Draco finally stumbled into a village. It appeared to be a muggle village for all intents and purposes, but there was one little shop called *Ed's Magical Travel Agency*. Hoping beyond hope that it was more than a whimsical muggle name, Draco pushed open the door.

Ed was sitting behind a desk, wearing a violet robe and writing with a quill. Draco sighed inwardly, in devout relief. Ed looked up. "Good morning! What can I do for you, young master?"

Draco spoke without preamble. "I need to purchase a portkey trip. How much to Hogsmeade, or near there?"

Ed consulted his charts; the numbers of which were moving continually. "At the moment, son, I'd say four Galleons. Have you got as much?"

Of course, he looked like a vagrant. Still, it was something of a shock. Draco dug through the cash Tandy had given him and came up with four Galleons' *worth*, at least. "Here."

Ed accepted the change. "Where to exactly?"

"Front gates of Hogwarts, please."

"Right-o. I don't think Hogwarts is open, but you're welcome to check," Ed said, fiddling with a bit of balled-up parchment. "She'll go off in a minute or so, if you can wait." He handed the parchment to Draco.

Draco drew a deep breath, then asked. "Do you know if the war's over?"

Ed gave him a shocked look. "What?! Where have you been?" he demanded incredulously. "Been holed up with muggles, have you?"

"Just tell me," Draco said, his jaw tense.

"Yes, it's over!" Ed said. "And about time, too! I say, it's been - "

But Draco never heard the end of the sentence; the portkey activated and he was swirling and dizzy, the hook in his belly aching already, as though it were really there, another device of Lucius' creation.

* * *

The grounds were silent. A hand-lettered sign clearly of Hagrid's designing had been posted to the gates, reading "Closed for war". Draco, pushing the gates open anyway, failed to see the second sign, stuck roughly into the grass, which read, "Re-opening for January term".

The front drive was longer than he remembered from all those Hogsmeade trips, and not a soul was in sight. At this moment, Draco just might have gone delirious with joy over seeing Filch. But not even Filch was about.

He half-expected the main doors to be locked, but they weren't. Draco pulled one of the doors back and slipped into the Entrance Hall. The silence was nearly deafening. Draco stood where he was for several long minutes, trying to decide what to do.

Hogwarts was closed. All the students had been sent home for the war. The staff were gone. Half were in the Order anyway, and who knew where they were? In St. Mungo's, perhaps - or dead. Draco had no idea what to do with himself. He supposed he should turn around and go back to Hogsmeade, try and get some news. But he wasn't thinking clearly, and besides, he was too tired for the walk. *I just want a little peace.*

He could see the stairs leading down to the dungeons, and a shudder ran through his ravaged body. Not the dungeons. Too many memories. And besides, he'd had quite enough of dungeons at present. He took the other stairs, the ones leading up, and before he quite knew it, Draco found himself in his oldest haunt.

The Owlery.

It was quiet, but not empty. Several owls were still there, rustling and flapping and occasionally hooting to themselves. They went very quiet when Draco came in, and all of their eyes fixed on him. "Hello," he said softly. He wondered if they remembered him. If they knew there was a war on. If they cared.

His eyes automatically searched for Hedwig, but she wasn't there. Draco felt a great load of weariness take him. He didn't know what to do. This place, though, brought him back to before the summer, before he'd graduated. He looked at his old window sill and shuddered again. He didn't have the balance for that any more. Draco went to the bench instead, the one Harry had, so long ago, it seemed, asked him to sit on with him in lieu of the window. Draco lay down on it and curled himself into a ball.

It was very cold. One of the owls hooted softly and flew down to him. He or she stretched out a wing and covered his shoulder, where his t-shirt had ripped from the lashings and the feathery wing warmed him. Another owl came down next and joined the first, covering Draco's knee. Another two joined in, and before Draco knew it, he was covered in wings. It was really very weird, but he didn't even have the energy to complain. He knew he should eat before falling asleep, but he was too tired. The wings were comforting, if strange, and Draco soon drifted off.

* * *

When Draco woke, there was a blanket draped over him, a Hogwarts-issue quilt. He wondered if he'd merely dreamed of the owls, a dozen owls fluttering down to perch on various bits of him, covering him with the warmth of their wings. Yes, probably a dream.

He had no idea how long he'd been sleeping. Draco pushed himself into a sitting position. His arms were trembling, and he recalled that he hadn't eaten recently enough. His pack was still there on the floor, and he pulled out his crackers. Ate them all, dully remembering the time when he and Harry had opted to eat crackers in his tent rather than go to supper.

It felt like years ago, and suddenly Draco couldn't swallow. It was all too much. It was so far beyond too much that he didn't know what to do with himself. Hot tears had glazed over his eyes, but he didn't really have the energy to cry. He leaned his back back against the wall behind him and closed his eyes as the tears slid down his cheeks and neck, the salt occasionally stinging in a scratch or cut. His throat ached. Harry being dead meant none of that, ever again. It was over all. When had he complained about not having enough memories of Harry? He had a thousand little moments, and they all crammed into his mind now, clamouring for equal attention. A warm Sunday afternoon, early in their relationship, spent in a stuffy tent, making love. A stolen moment under the invisibility cloak outside the lodge, before the twins had come along. A hot, nervous first kiss, here in the Owlery. That beautiful moment, when Harry had finally given in, beside the makeshift Quidditch shed in Field Seven, when Draco had first put his feelings into words. Harry laughing, his face open, unguarded, and relaxed - because of him. Countless nights falling asleep in Harry's arms, his body heat surrounding and drenching Draco. He bent forward, elbows on his damaged knees, his hands over his eyes, and made no sound as the silent sobs tore through him. It was too much. He couldn't deal with it any more.

After many minutes had passed, Draco pulled himself together. Crying wasn't going to do anything. He just had to find out. It was time to go to Hogsmeade and get the news. He picked himself up and rummaged in his pack, blowing his nose on the handkerchief Tandy had wrapped the food in. His joints were stiff and several of his cuts had broken open again when he'd stood, but Draco hardly noticed it. He slung his pack onto his back, nodded wordlessly at the owls in a mute attempt at thanks, and made his way downstairs.

* * *

He heard the noise before he reached the main level. Descending the last flight of stairs, Draco noticed that the doors to the Great Hall stood open. They hadn't been, yesterday, or whenever it had been that he'd passed through the Entrance Hall. Perhaps - he went to the door, and the sight that met his eyes was something beyond belief.

There was a party on. In the Great Hall. And it was all people he knew. Other trainees from the camp, Hogwarts staff and older Order members - he saw Shacklebolt and Moody, McGonagall - his eyes searched, frantic now - he saw Weasley, which - could it mean - ? Draco stopped dead, three steps into the Hall.

Harry.

He was holding a full glass of red wine, one hand partly over his face, looking thoroughly upset and angry. Granger was there, looking like she was trying to talk sense into him or something along those lines, all the while patting him and looking terribly sorry about something or other. Draco was struck by a mad desire to laugh, cry, and scream all at once. He couldn't move; he just stood there, riveted to the spot.

It all happened like magic. As though someone had cued the crowd, a sudden hush fell over the Great Hall. And then Harry looked up, and saw him. The wine glass slipped from his fingers and smashed on the floor, wine splashing everywhere. His face looked as though it had been turned to stone. No one moved. Every breath was suspended; all eyes on either Harry or Draco.

"My… *gods*," Harry said, sounding absolutely stunned. One hand went out to grip Granger's wrist. "Hermione - am I - is he - "

Granger sounded as shocked as Harry looked, and her voice shook as though she were going to cry. "Yes, he is, Harry. You're not seeing things."

Harry began to walk toward him. Draco still couldn't move or speak; he just watched Harry come over. He was still wearing his old jeans and a DA t-shirt in stark contrast to the rest of the room, but Draco only had eyes for Harry.

Harry stopped, about fifteen feet away, looking horribly uncertain. "I thought you were dead," he said, his voice shaking.

Draco found his voice. "I thought *you* were dead," he said, his voice still weak and hoarse. "They told me you were."

"The hell!" Harry started walking again, his face full of concern. "*Gods*, what have they *done* to you - ?" His voice broke at the end, and Draco couldn't trust himself to even try to answer.

It didn't matter. Harry was there. He was alive, and he was there. Draco regained the power of motion and took one large step forward. "Harry - "

Harry's arms went around him, and Draco could feel his chest heaving - *he could feel Harry's chest* - against his, and he knew that Harry was crying. The little control he had over his emotions slipped away again, and he was sobbing on Harry's shoulder, his voice broken, his arms wrapped tightly enough around Harry to snap ribs, and his wounds be *damned*.

Other sounds returned came back to his perceptions then, and Draco realized that quite a few other people in the Hall were crying, too; watching their spectacle in the middle of the Hall from around its edges. He didn't care. All he knew was that he didn't ever want to let go.

Harry turned his face into Draco's ear. "I couldn't find you," he said, tears still pouring down his face, hiccoughing. "I looked everywhere. I couldn't find you, and I'm so, so sorry."

Draco's arms tightened further. "Don't be. No one could have found me."

"I *wanted* to so badly, Draco - I *failed* you!"

Draco stroked Harry's hair - it was tangled, as though Harry hadn't combed it in days. "It's okay. It's all going to be okay."

Harry pulled back then, just far enough so that he could kiss Draco at last. And kiss they did, blood from one of Draco's many cuts mingling in both their mouths, sharp and salty. After a long moment, during which the drop of a pin could have been heard, Harry let him go gently, but kept his hands on Draco's shoulders. He was just going to say something, that worried furrow still creasing his brow, but Draco didn't hear it. The kiss had left him slightly breathless, and the world suddenly slipped and tilted. The floor angled itself strangely, and Harry's arms were there, but not in the right place, or something - Draco's last conscious thought was of Harry's anxious face, his mouth forming his name. And then everything went dark.

* * *

"Mr. Potter, I am *not* going to tell you again. I will *give* you an update when I *have* one. Kindly stop harassing me!"

"Tell me what's wrong with him, damn it!"

Harry's voice sounded hysterical. A cool hand touched Draco's forehead and he opened his eyes. Snape stood over him, his countenance very sober. "Draco. Can you drink something?"

Draco focused on him, remembering now that he'd seen Snape before, in the past forty-eight hours or so. But it was also mingled into other memories, of being forced to drink and then Snape's name coming up… Draco blinked several times and tried to clear his thoughts.

"Drink," Snape urged. "It will help."

A strong hand was beneath his head, helping him, and gods, he was lying flat on his back again, wasn't he? Draco felt the glass lip of a beaker on his bottom lip and opened his mouth obediently. It took a few moments, during which he sensed that people were watching him anxiously, but then his mind cleared some. "Snape?" His voice - raspy again.

Something like relief came over Snape's face. "You are responding," he told Draco. "Good. Stay with me for a moment."

"Harry - "

" - is here," Snape assured him, looking over Draco's form at someone else.

Harry came forward and smiled down at him, though the smile was marred with sadness and pain. "I'm here," he confirmed, and took Draco's hand.

Draco tried to squeeze, but he was too weak. Harry put his other hand over Draco's and just held, still smiling encouragingly. "I'm not going anywhere. Don't worry."

Draco smiled back. Snape's hand was still beneath his head, and he helped Draco sit up a little more. "Can you drink some more?"

Draco nodded and accepted it, again. "What is it?"

"I am trying to counteract whatever was given to you," Snape said. He glanced at Madam Pomfrey, who was hovering in the periphery. "Give us a few moments," he said.

She sighed, but nodded and left. The back of Snape's hand was on his forehead. "Your fever is significantly better," he said. "Can you talk a little? I will give you something for your throat, but I believe it is mostly a question of disuse."

Draco nodded again, and gave Snape him something different to drink. It was fiery, and burned. In a good way. He coughed and Harry made a sudden movement, concerned.

Snape pulled up a stool. "Tell me whenever you require something," he said. "I can give you more for the pain. Most of your cuts are healed, and the swelling around your eye is nearly there. What I am most concerned with now is your nervous system and your mind. I think your mind, at least, should be alright. We have you on quite a bit of potion for the other, though. I suspect it will be a matter of time before we know for certain. Now. Start from the beginning. You were on watch."

Draco remembered. Saw the black glove again, the glove that meant his father. He began to shake. Harry's hands tightened. "Lucius," he said. "Wait." He turned his face to Harry's and asked urgently, "Is Voldemort dead?"

"Yes," Harry said at once, briefly. "He is gone."

"And - Lucius?"

Draco sensed them exchanging a look over him, but didn't mind. He just wanted to know. "Yes," Snape said gently. "Go on, please,"

"I never heard him coming," Draco said. His voice still scraped a little, but it was better. "I just saw his glove, over my face, and he sedated me. When I woke up, I was in the dungeons at the Manor. I only got away - I don't know. How long have I been in here?"

"Two days," Snape said.

"About two days before that, then," Draco said.

Harry shivered. "Gods, almost a *month*," he said, horrified.

"Yeah. I guess it was. It was hard to keep track of the time," Draco said, unwillingly remembering the nightmares.

"They questioned you," Snape said. It was not a question.

"Yes. More times than I can remember."

"Who?"

"Mostly Lucius. Sometimes Dolohov. And once, near the end, Voldemort."

"What did the ask?"

"Always the same things. Where Dumbledore was, where the two of you were, where Headquarters is." Draco felt drained already, and it had just begun. "Could I have some water?"

"Of course." Snape held it to his lips.

"There didn't seem to be much particular method," Draco said dully. "Sometimes they beat me, sometimes they gave me potions - once or twice they burned me when I wouldn't take them - and I was never awake for very long."

"Did they feed you?" Harry asked softly.

"I don't think so. Maybe they gave me strengthening potions or something, but I don't remember."

"You've lost a lot of weight," Harry said gently.

"You will gain it back," Snape said sharply, throwing Harry a look. "You have already gained some back. What else did they do?"

"I think they used the Cruciatus curse on me, several times," Draco said, trying to remember.

"Yes. That would explain the damage to your nervous system. Go on."

Draco closed his eyes. "Lucius - liked to ask about Harry, sometimes. He took my letters."

They exchanged another glance. Snape changed the subject. "How did you escape?"

Draco swallowed. "I woke up one day, and no one was there. Then I realized that my restraints were looser or something, and I managed to get free. There was water in there, and I drank some and looked for my stuff. It took me a long time, because I could hardly stand. I was on my back the entire time. At least that I remember. I found my crackers. They'd crushed them, but I ate the crumbs and went upstairs. There was no one there except a house-elf. She bound my ankle for me, gave me some food and water and a bit of money, and I left. Oh, I also overheard Lucius telling someone where the gap in the wards was, back behind the well. So, I went out the back of the kitchen and got out. Once I was past it, I realized that the Manor was so heavily warded that it had become undetectable, even to me. You could have walked right through it. That's probably why you couldn't find me, if you looked."

"We couldn't find the Manor at all," Snape agreed grimly. "Not for lack of trying, either. Harry and the twins and I spent days and days searching. We thought you might be there, but we could not be sure. We discovered a fortress of theirs in Scotland, along the Tay. Not far from where we were the last time you were with us, and it was full of prisoners. Was there anyone else at the Manor?"

"No," Draco said bleakly.

Harry's hands squeezed again. "Then what?" he asked quietly.

"I tried to find a town. I got to one the next day, and bought a portkey here, with the money the elf gave me. There was no one here. I slept in the Owlery. I didn't know what to do, or where to go. Voldemort had told me that the war was over, that he'd won. That you were dead, but they

were looking for Dumbledore, for revenge. I didn't know whether to believe him or not. I was very confused and disoriented by then."

"And no wonder," Snape put in dryly. "You could have had lasting brain damage from some of that stuff. As it is, you have been fortunate."

Draco managed a short laugh. "Have I," he said bitterly.

Snape's eyes were compassionate. "In a manner of speaking."

"Go on," Harry urged gently. "Then what? How long did you stay in the Owlery?"

"One night, maybe?" Draco guessed. He looked at Harry, remembering his flood of memories, and for a moment, he couldn't speak again. Harry's eyes were very green and very… Harry, at the moment.

"And then you came downstairs?" Harry said. "Gods, what a weird scene that must have been for you to see! Escaping a *torture* chamber and stumbling into a fucking *party*!"

"I was a bit - out of my depth," Draco agreed, smiling ruefully. "I thought maybe I was hallucinating again."

Snape made a clucking sound with his tongue, not unlike Madam Pomfrey's version of the same noise, and reached for another beaker of the first potion. "Drink," he ordered.

Draco took it and, with Harry's help this time, did so.

"I thought I was hallucinating, too," Harry said, one hand beneath Draco's head, the other over Draco's hand on the beaker. "I'd been dreaming about you."

Draco gave Snape the beaker. He could ask, with Snape there, but he didn't want to. "Snape," he said, trying to somehow convey how very glad he was to see *him* again, too - but - "Do you think I could - "

Snape understood and got to his feet at once. "Just a few moments," he warned. "I need to keep a close eye on you."

Draco nodded quickly. "Okay."

"I will be back in a quarter of an hour." Snape strode out of the ward.

Draco looked at Harry, and Harry gazed back, stroking his forehead softly. "How do you feel?" Harry asked, his voice almost a caress in and of itself.

"Better," Draco said, and it was true. Granted, he couldn't have really felt much worse, but still. "I was so afraid you were - "

"Don't say it," Harry said sharply, cutting him off. "I thought you must be, too, but I'm not and you're not, and it's all going to be okay. And I have something for you."

"What?"

"Snape told me to tell you not to get too excited about this," Harry warned. He stood and unlocked a drawer in a little table beside the bed with his wand. "Three things, actually." He looked at Draco. "Calm?"

"Yeah, what is it?" Draco was excited despite himself.

Harry pulled out a wand. His wand. A wave of relief washed over Draco. "*You* have it," he said, and Harry pressed it into his hand, closing his own over Draco's. "How on earth did you get it? The last time I saw it, Voldemort had it!"

Harry pulled Draco's fist toward himself and kissed it. "Found it on his body after I killed him," he said softly. "I was looking for it. I was horribly afraid it was somewhere in the depths of Malfoy Manor and that neither of us would ever get to it."

Draco smiled and gave it back to him. "Keep it for me?"

"I will." It was a promise. Harry took something else out, but hesitated. "There are two more things, and one will make you happier than the other, but one has really sad news attached to it. Which would you rather have first?"

Draco pondered. "The happy one."

Harry's smile was almost heart-breakingly beautiful. "These," he said, his voice trembling just a little, "I found on your - on Lucius' body," he said. "I thought they might have meant something to you since you, foolish boy, didn't burn them like you were supposed to."

He took the wand from Draco's hand and put several small, battered bits of parchment into it instead. Draco knew what they were instantly, and pushed himself up on one elbow. "Harry!"

Harry laughed and cried at the same time, his arms tight around Draco. He perched on the edge of the bed to get closer. "You should have burnt them," he said again, stroking Draco's hair. "You beautiful, beautiful fool."

"Never," Draco said fiercely. "I'll never burn them. I couldn't. I burnt the other bits, Harry, I did. I just needed these ones."

"Shall I hold onto them for you?"

"Please," Draco said. His brow creased. "What's the sad part?"

"You might have guessed it already," Harry said, biting his lip. He brought out a folded square of parchment. "This was my last letter to you. I'm guessing you never got it, because I found *it* on Voldemort's body, too."

"He - he read it to me," Draco said, his voice breaking, looking away.

Harry wouldn't let him pull away, though. "Hedwig was intercepted," he said softly. "She - she never came back, Draco."

The realization hit Draco hard. "You mean - "

Harry's chin trembled. "Yes."

Draco's throat burned and he pulled Harry close, not sure whether he was giving comfort or needing it. "No," he whispered.

Harry's back shook softly. "I'm so sorry to have to tell you," he said, very quietly. "It was weeks ago, but I know it's new to you."

And Draco realized that a part of him should have known. The owls in the Owlery knew. He hadn't dreamed of them trying to comfort and warm him that night; they'd remembered him. As Hedwig's friend. "Shit," he said thickly, tears obscuring his voice.

"I know," Harry said, and for a long moment, they just held each other.

Finally, Harry pulled away. "No more bad news for now," he said, wiping his eyes. "Let's talk about us."

Draco tried to smile. "You still love me, then?"

Harry pulled out the ending scrap of his second last letter and re-read it to Draco. "*I will always be yours*," he finished, looking at Draco steadily, simply radiating Gryffindor earnestness. "I meant it then and I mean it now, Draco. You have me. Forever, if you want me."

"I want you," Draco said, his throat aching again. "You were the only reason I made myself get out of there. I had to find you. Or know. One or the other. I love you. I need you."

"Draco - " Harry's hands were on his face, pulling him closer, and they were finally kissing again. And that was it, Draco finally felt like he could breathe again. It lasted until Snape came back in, which was some time later. And even then, no one hurried to finish anything.

As Snape said, later (albeit sarcastically), their love was already the most popular war romance

in the wizarding community, and any fears they might have had about been accepted in society as a couple needn't be considered. Though neither of them had even been thinking that far into the future.

* * *

Harry and Snape were both constants in Draco's ward. Because of the damage (now considered to be healing) to his nervous system, Draco had been given a private ward. Pomfrey and Snape both lectured Draco's visitors severely about the importance of walking lightly. Only the very most important people were allowed in, namely the twins, and once, McGonagall. Weasley and Granger both wanted to come, but Draco rather thought his nerves could use a little more healing before he'd be up to dealing with Weasley again. He supposed it was inevitable at some point, but not now.

Harry steadfastly refused to let anyone give Draco any war news until he was completely healed - aside from his own revelation about Hedwig, which Draco would have realized all too soon, anyway - and Snape agreed. Draco realized that if the world had come to such a point that Severus Snape and Harry Potter were in agreement - then only the very foolish should consider going against them. For his part, he was content to let them boss his about. For now, at least.

By nights, Harry slept in the bed next to his. Pomfrey would have preferred he sleep in another room, but neither of them cared, and Snape said it was fine. Draco let the two of *them* wage their own wars. He wanted Harry.

A week after he'd first woken up in the Hospital Wing, Draco woke in the night. It was still dark, and he wasn't sure why he was awake. He looked over at Harry's bed in alarm, but Harry was still there, sleeping peacefully. Draco turned on his side (he'd never sleep on his back again) and just watched him for a bit. To his surprise, Harry's eyelids flickered after a minute or two. "Draco?" he whispered.

Draco smiled. "Hi," he whispered back.

"Why're you awake?"

"I don't know."

"Do you need something?"

"Yeah. You. Come here." Draco saw the hesitation in Harry's eyes. "Please. I can handle it."

"Can you? I don't want to undo anything."

"You won't. Just come here." Draco shifted over. It was true; Snape had just said yesterday that his nervous system was almost entirely stable again.

Harry climbed very gingerly into the bed. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. Just hold me," Draco said, hoping Harry would agree. He turned on his other side to show Harry what he meant.

Harry's laugh was soft, but he did as he was told, moving over to curl his body against Draco's from behind. "Damned pyjamas," he said sleepily. "Want to feel you for real again."

"Soon," Draco promised. Harry's arm tucked lightly around his waist, and his warmth cradled Draco from his back to his heels.

"Soon," Harry echoed, pressing a kiss onto his back, through the cotton shirt. His soft, regular breathing steadied Draco's and he remember how to align his breathing with Harry's again. There. *Now* he could sleep properly.

Draco slept.

A/N: Hello! Thanks for bearing with me, folks! Apologies again for all the angsting the last chapter caused. :) Thanks for all your many, really nice comments! - SilentAuror.

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Chapter: 30

Chapter 30: The Breaking of the Dawn

Snape looked up as the bed sank to his right; gently as Lupin always moved, Snape always woke when he came to bed. Regardless of whether they were at Grimmauld Place or Hogwarts, in fact. It was a constant, a given. Lupin knew it, too, and turned toward him apologetically. "Sorry, Severus."

"It's alright." Snape's voice was scratchy.

"How is he today?"

"He" meant Malfoy - Snape was spending his days and many parts of his nights in the Hogwarts Hospital Wing, tending to the boy's many wounds. Snape yawned and pushed fingers through his tousled hair. "Better," he said. "Much better, in fact." It pleased him, somehow, that Lupin took such an interest. True, Malfoy had once been a student of his, but Lupin had never really known him. Not like Potter and the rest.

"His nerves coming along?"

Snape propped himself up on one elbow. He hated being physically lower than whomever he was speaking to, even Lupin. "Yes, his system has nearly stabilized. He took a bit of a dip after Potter told him about the owl, so we decided that Malfoy shouldn't hear anything else that might upset him until he achieved stability."

"So, is it just about time?" Lupin asked. He was lying on his back, content to let Snape look down on him.

Snape began to absent-mindedly trace random patterns on Lupin's faintly-scarred chest. "Yes," he said. "Potter and I agreed that he should be told about the rest of the war tomorrow."

Lupin smiled. "You'll be there?"

Snape shook his head, with a faint smile. "No. Potter wants to, and I am fine with not being dragged through it all again. Besides," he added, his voice lowering slightly, "tomorrow is Saturday."

Lupin's smile brightened. "So… you'll be staying here for the day, then?"

Snape nodded. "I should go back and check on Malfoy at some point, but it can wait until the evening. Potter knows I am here, should there be a problem. Pomfrey, too. And you?" he asked, watching his own, pale finger move over Lupin's nipple. Lupin stiffened, his breath hitching. "No urgent summons to the Ministry? No meetings or gatherings here, or otherwise untoward activities to… get in our way?"

"None," Lupin breathed. A lean arm reached up and pulled Snape down to his chest. "We have the house to ourselves."

Snape smiled. "Good," he said roughly, and it was the last time he spoke coherently for many minutes after that.

And really, what need was there for words, when their coupling was so practised, so perfect? Lupin's body melted beneath his, thighs parting easily, pulling up as Snape fit himself in the space between, pushing into the other man's flesh. Their moving together was so fluid, so simple, and yet still so wonderful. Short gasps and longer breaths said all that was needed - *now, yes, ready, please, now* - and they knew how to obey each other's unspoken requests by now. It was enough. Snape's long fingers closed around Lupin - twisted/pulled, and Lupin was coming, his breath hot on Snape's ear. Snape closed his eyes, moaned, and let himself go. His release filled Lupin, and Lupin knew it and desired it. It was enough. It was perfect.

* * *

Draco opened his eyes. He sensed immediately that he was alone in the bed. Alarm. "Harry?"

"I'm here," Harry said instantly, from behind him.

Draco turned over quickly and sat up. "Where were you?" His heart was still beating quickly.

Harry came nearer and smiled, as though Draco's paranoia and clinginess were nothing other than a joy to him. Draco wondered how long that would last, realistically. He couldn't help it. "I just went to the lav," he said. "Move over, I wasn't getting up yet."

"Oh." Feeling slightly abashed, Draco pulled his legs back into the bed and shifted over. Harry climbed in and slid over to him again, fingers finding Draco's and weaving them together. "Sorry," Draco said finally, the ball of tension in his chest unwinding a little.

"Don't be," Harry said simply. "I understand how you must feel, waking up and me not being there. I just didn't want to wake you."

"It's okay," Draco said, absently trying to figure out how it had shifted from *him* apologizing to *Harry* apologizing. Whatever. "What time is it?"

Harry reached for his wand. "Just past seven. Are you still tired?"

Draco thought about it, then yawned. "Yeah."

"Me, too. Let's go back to sleep, then," Harry proposed. "Which way do you want to sleep?"

Draco rolled onto his right again, the way he had been. "Is this okay?"

"Of course." Harry moved over, obligingly, kissed his back the way he always did when they slept this way.

Draco listened to his lover's breathing slow. He had a question to ask, but wasn't sure if Harry was still awake or not. "Harry?" he asked, very softly.

"Yeah?" It was sleepy, but awake.

"When are you going to tell me about the war?"

A slight pause. "Later today," Harry said.

Draco's eyes were open, waiting. "Why haven't you told me yet?"

"I didn't want to upset you. Snape said you - your nerves - weren't stable enough yet. I agreed."

"How did you know? I mean, what made you think that?"

Harry paused again, then moved back to pull Draco onto his back. "When I told you about Hedwig," he said softly, "I remember holding you and thinking that your heart was beating much too fast."

"I was upset," Draco said defensively.

"Of course," Harry said quickly, apologetically. "But it was *really* fast, Draco - I just - didn't want to take any unnecessary risks. Trying to follow your advice, that's all."

"My advice? Oh, right," Draco said, remembering his letter. "I remember." He smiled, and Harry beamed, evidently relieved.

"So, later on, okay? Snape thinks it's okay now." He looked anxious.

"Okay," Draco said. He felt the urge to sleep returning, and that was frustrating, too. He wanted his old energy back. "Harry - "

"Yeah?" Harry asked, looking intently at him, his eyes wide and bright without his glasses.

Draco reached for him and Harry moved toward him at once, as though he would have done so without waiting for Draco's answer, anyway. Their mouths moved together, and the intimacy was sweet. Draco lay back, pulling Harry with him, and Harry's mouth lipped at his chin, his cheeks, his throat. Draco slid his fingers into Harry's messy hair and felt the very edges of happiness just slide across his mind again.

"I love you," Harry whispered. "Always, Draco."

"Always," Draco echoed, his mind turning the word over and over, testing it for loopholes and outs. There weren't any. He kissed Harry again, and didn't remember, later, how he went from that to being asleep again. But he woke up still on his back, Harry's weight warm and heavy on his chest, and somehow, very, very sweet.

* * *

"Are you awake?" Harry's voice asked.

Draco could feel his lips moving against the skin of his chest. "Am now." He cleared his throat, and his voice was less scratchy.

Harry raised his head, smiling sheepishly. "Sorry."

Draco smiled back. "It's okay. I probably would have woken up soon, anyway."

Harry pulled himself up and turned onto his back, stretching luxuriously. "How would you feel about having a shower?"

"With you?" Draco asked, waking up a little more.

"Yeah." Harry grinned. "I don't see Pomfrey anywhere. Let's sneak into the lav before she comes around."

"Okay." It was a good incentive to get up. Draco followed Harry out of the bed and padded barefoot after him across the ward. The flagged floor was cold, but he'd be warm enough, soon. So far, he'd been too weak or else lacking the energy to engage in full-fledged sex with Harry (and besides, in the Hospital Wing, really!) - but they'd started taking showers together last week, rediscovering the gentler joys of mutual wanking in the hot steam. Pomfrey had caught them emerging from the bathroom together once, and had been properly horrified and openly condemning. If Draco required assistance while bathing, she'd scolded, well, that was *her* job.

Draco was still proud that he hadn't said what he wanted to say at the time. Perhaps extended

interrogation had been good for something, after all. He closed the bathroom door behind them as Harry turned on the hot water before turning to face him, eyes sparkling in anticipation.

They undressed for each other, just a slow, simple removal of pyjama shirts and pants, but it was enough. No one had been more pleased than Draco, the first time he'd woken up with morning wood again - but Harry had been a very close second. They had lain very, very quietly together - Pomfrey could be heard moving about on the other side of the curtain - hands slipping into each other's pants, stroking and trying not to moan. It had been worth it; the torturously silent extraction of pleasure long-denied, and just the beauty of it, being with Harry again, feeling Harry's lips on his again while they both came and tried not to gasp or breathe too loudly -

Draco stepped out of the cotton trousers and kicked them to the side. Harry copied his movements and pulled him close. For a long moment, they just stood there, touching almost everywhere, kissing slowly, luxuriously. There were no alarms here. There was no training to be done, no laps to be run, no war to be fought - it was all over. All they had was time.

With the exception of the Pomfrey factor. Draco let Harry lead him into the shower. They always got the necessaries out of the way first, washing each other's hair (Draco had shown Harry the *exact* way to apply conditioner, how much pressure to use, how long to leave it there - it was very important, he'd lectured. Harry had laughed at him, but consistently did as he'd been told.) The feeling of Harry's fingers against his scalp was wonderful, and Harry seemed to enjoy it, too. Sometimes they forgot themselves and ended up kissing until the shampoo ran into their eyes. But even that was okay. Harry finished rinsing the conditioner out of Draco's hair and turned them around so that he was under the stream now. "Rinse," he instructed, but Draco's fingers were already there. Harry's body was malleable under his touch, responding at every touch or command or request. And today, Draco wanted more. He was ready for more, and he wanted so much to give Harry something back, for all he'd done recently.

Harry's eyes were closed as the water ran over his face, his mouth parted, lips reddened in the heat. Draco put his hands on Harry's hips, then carefully got into a kneeling position. The bottom of the tub was rather hard, but all of the cuts and bruises were long gone from his knees. Draco pressed a kiss to Harry's hip bone, then trailed his lips down to the wet, dark curls at the base of his lover's cock.

"Draco - what are you - "

Draco looked up to see that Harry's eyes had flown open, concerned. "What does it look like?" he asked, his voice full of laughter. "I'm not kneeling in worship, don't worry."

Harry laughed. "Good," he said, and hastily stopped protesting.

Draco's mouth wandered over his balls, warm and dusky even in the shower. He remembered that taste, that scent, and it was wonderful. Harry was making incoherent little noises, arms bracing his weight on the glass door and the tiled wall of the shower respectively. Draco licked along the underside of Harry's cock before sliding his mouth over it, and steadied Harry's knees with his hands - they were trembling. And he was thoroughly enjoying it, almost more than receiving it. Draco sucked, tightening his lips, his tongue cupping Harry's hardness, tasting the first, bittersweet drop of liquid desire in mouth, and loved it. One of Harry's hands came away to stroke over Draco's smooth, wet hair, and he exhaled loudly, his breath stirring the clouds of steam around them. Harry tasted the same. Wonderful. Draco sucked harder, stroked furiously with his tongue, one of his hands working at the base of Harry's cock, and in just a few moments, Harry came, gasping and clutching at Draco's hair, his shoulder.

When it was over, Draco let Harry's cock go reluctantly. He'd forgotten how much he enjoyed doing that. Harry grasped his arms and pulled him up. "You're brilliant and beautiful and *talented* - " he murmured, babbling, and pulled Draco's mouth to his own. "I'd forgotten how good you are at that."

Draco suddenly remembered how to smirk, and took advantage of the fact at once. "I hadn't," he said, grinning.

"Git." Harry surveyed him fondly. "I'm worried about you falling down in here. Let's get out of the shower, and I'll return the favour."

"I won't - "

"*I* almost did, and I'm perfectly healthy," Harry said stubbornly. "It's - kind of a shock, how good it feels, when we *haven't*, for so long. I don't want you getting hurt, that's all. Come on, it'll be fine."

Harry turned off the water and they stepped out. They'd taken to drying each other - well, it had started with Harry drying Draco, but now that he had the strength, he always did it back. It was more arousing than it should be, but no one was arguing. The bathroom was very warm, which was good. Harry spread out several towels on the floor and instructed Draco to lie down. It was not a large bathroom, and there was just barely room for them to both lie down, Harry positioned between Draco's legs. Draco saw that Harry's erection was already back, thanks to the rough

towelling, and he was somehow pleased. Like Harry couldn't get enough of him. Harry kissed Draco all over his pelvic area, inspecting scars with gentle fingers and dipping his tongue into some of them. Inching further down, he inspected Draco's general package. "You have a scar here," he said softly, touching the very base of Draco's balls, which made him shiver. "How did you get that?"

Draco tried to remember. "It might have been from one of the times they whipped me," he said at last. "Maybe even the first time. I'd forgotten."

Harry said nothing, just stroked his tongue over it gently. "Does it hurt?"

"No, it - " Draco's breath seemed to have stopped, and he had to both focus on speech and remembering how to breathe - "feels really good, actually."

Harry glanced up at him and smiled then. "Good," he said, and licked it again. He didn't stop there, either. He clearly hadn't forgotten how sensitive Draco was to being licked like this, and was applying himself to it with great intent. His tongue moved over the soft, wrinkly skin of Draco's balls, traced the line between his cock and his hip bones, swirled around the very base of his erection, then moved along the underside as Draco had done. Draco was nearly ready to come just at that, and realized that Harry had been right not to do this in the shower. Bloody Gryffindor. His fingers slid into Harry's hair without thinking, and Harry took him into his mouth at last.

"Oh, *gods* - " Draco gasped. "Harry - !"

A muffled, wicked-sounding laugh, and Harry sucked harder. Draco watched him down the length of his own body, watched his cock sliding into the rounded tightness of Harry's mouth. It felt so incredible that he'd stopped breathing again. It was agonizingly good. Harry's head moved up, his lips just around the head of Draco's cock, tonguing it hard - Draco sucked in a breath, dizzy, his fingers curling hard into the towel beneath him, clenching. He couldn't speak, even to beg - Harry seemed to know, instinctively, though, and took pity on him, engulfing his full length again. His eyes flicked up to Draco's once, very serious, and Draco couldn't tear his gaze away. Not that he wanted to. Harry's tongue was firm on the underside, his lips tight all around, and Draco's hips were struggling desperately against the grip of Harry's hands, fighting to get more of that intensely wonderful feeling. Finally, Harry stopped trying to stop him, moved his hands to pull Draco's off the towel, turning them over beneath his own. Their palms braced against each other's, Harry stopped moving his head, tacitly inviting Draco to just go ahead and thrust into his mouth. Waves of gratitude nearly drowned Draco at this point, and he did just that. The softness of Harry's throat undid him completely - after a few, panting thrusts, Draco came, his toes

curling, a silent scream wracking the rest of his body.

Harry held on until he'd finished swallowing, then immediately pulled himself up along Draco's body, full-blown erection bumping against Draco's thigh. Draco grabbed his face and kissed him utterly breathless. "Gods," he breathed, his heart still hammering, "I don't deserve you!"

Harry laughed; it was warm and full of affection, and something deeper. "Of course you do," he said, and resumed the kiss. Their hands met - Draco was just about to reach down to take care of Harry, and Harry was about to pull his hand down. In complete agreement, they both transferred Draco's hand to Harry's cock, and wanked Harry off together, tongues tangling the entire time. Once Harry had come, they lay still, tangled together, damp with sweat and the steam still swirling around the bathroom.

"Love you," Draco said, his eyes half-closed.

Harry turned his face up, kissed his throat. "Love you, too," he said. Neither of them commented on the fact that it was usually Draco who said it first, now.

After awhile, they stirred; it was time to get going. Harry suggested that they shave each other's faces, muggle-style. He'd apparently heard it could be very nice. Draco shrugged. "Why not?" He said the right thing; Harry looked very pleased. He set about getting all the accoutrements organized, and Draco was highly amused at the prospected of slathering thick, creamy white stuff all over his face only to scrape it off with a tiny, lethal-looking blade. "Whatever gets you off," he said, smirking.

Harry just smiled sweetly back. They were sitting on the counter, the sink between them, filled with warm water (to rinse the blades, Harry had explained). Harry raised his arm. "Just relax," he said. "I'm not going to cut you. I shave this way during the summer all the time. I know what I'm doing."

"Okay," Draco said, only a bit dubious. He held his face very still as Harry drew the blade down across his cheek. Oh. Harry had been right. It was just a light scrape, nothing worse. He let Harry do two or three more strokes (looking ridiculous, his face swathed in the foam) and decided to try it, himself, while Harry was rinsing the blade. Harry held still and let him. Draco bent forward and inspected the skin. Yes. Very smooth, indeed. He'd done it right. Pleased with himself, he dipped the little blade in the water and went to do it again. Harry was smiling. "What?" he asked, self-conscious.

"Nothing," Harry said, still smiling. "You just look so… intent. And pleased."

Draco smiled back, reluctantly. "Well, I *am* pleased that you're not spurting blood everywhere," he said dryly.

Harry's free hand stroked gently over his thigh. "You know that's not what I mean."

Before Draco could answer, there was a sharp knock at the door. "Mr. Malfoy?" Madam Pomfrey's equally-sharp tone demanded. "Are you in there?"

Draco dropped the blade and they quickly, silently hopped off the counter and wrapped large, white bath towels around their waists. There was nothing to be done about the wet hair or any of the other evidence that they'd obviously showered very recently, but Draco went to the door, speaking through it. "Yes? I'm here."

She sounded very cross. "What are you doing? Are you alone?"

Draco cracked the door open. "No," he said. "Harry's showing me how to shave, the muggle way. Is that okay?" He used his best innocent voice and expression.

Pomfrey looked startled at his lathered face, but regained her composure quickly. "Oh. Well, then. Yes, I suppose that's fine. You'll need to come and take your potions in a little while. Don't forget. And you need to eat breakfast, too."

"Don't worry," Harry called to her, from behind Draco. "I'll take care of all that. Just leave the potion doses out, okay? We'll be done here soon."

Pomfrey sniffed, clearly not thinking much of this plan. On the other hand, she had quite a few other patients to deal with, so she didn't argue. "Very well. Don't go cutting yourselves, now - that's the last thing I need!"

"We'll be careful," Draco said, with a nice smile, and closed the door. "*Silencio*. Nosy wench. I know she's just doing her job, but honestly!"

"She just wanted to make sure there wasn't any unauthorized gay sex going on in here," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Come back here."

They finished shaving each other's faces, and Draco discovered that Harry, once again, had been right. It *was* nice. Like drying each other. Just a nice little way to do something for each other. Harry finished patting Draco's face dry and leaned forward to kiss him, the towel still on Draco's cheek.

"Hungry?" Harry asked after.

"Yeah, actually." Draco smiled at him. "Breakfast in bed?"

"Certainly." Harry smiled back. Another little ritual they'd developed over the past week. Dobby was always only too happy to serve Harry, his erstwhile love, and Draco, his erstwhile master - they'd both noticed that Dobby seemed unduly pleased to have an opportunity to do anything for Draco away from Lucius' influence. Like Tandy, perhaps, Draco had mused. The old loyalties still clearly ran strong in Dobby, despite having been freed from his Malfoy-specific service five and a half years earlier. Draco also noticed how both he and Harry had been quick to develop and adhere to any little ritual. Their new beginning, Harry had called it once. Their new life.

* * *

They were sitting up in bed, nearly finished eating. Harry had a thing for feeding him, and frankly, Draco really didn't mind. They alternated bites, and occasionally, Harry kissed him. Their choice today had been Belgian waffles with strawberries and whipped cream. Draco leaned over and licked a bit of the whipped cream off the corner of Harry's mouth. They didn't talk much; just focused on eating for the moment. They both knew what was coming next, and Draco knew that Harry wouldn't start talking until they were finished, anyway.

Coffee was the last thing, and they sipped in companionable silence. Eventually, Draco said, "I don't want to stay here for it. Can we go somewhere else? Somewhere where we're guaranteed some privacy?"

"Of course," Harry said. "I was just thinking about that. There's actual a lounge meant for parents, when they come to visit their kids here. It's small, and really nice, and has lots of locks. It's a little sunroom, basically. Lots of plants and windows and sunlight."

"Sounds good," Draco said. They'd gotten dressed, and it still felt novel, to be allowed to wear something other than pyjamas again. But this - a trip out of the ward - that meant shoes, which was almost exciting in and of itself. He shook his head inwardly. What a dork he'd become. No matter. He pulled on his trainers - they were new; exact replicas of his old ones, which had been destroyed, along with his clothing - and tied them. His new jeans were just like his old ones, but not broken in as well yet. The shirt was plain black, one of Harry's.

Harry slipped his hand into Draco's and led him out of the ward. There were students about - though it was still November, McGonagall had decided to re-open Hogwarts already, citing that there was still plenty of time left in the term and that she wanted as little of it wasted as possible. The walk between the ward and the lounge was quite short, though, and no one noticed them.

The lounge was just as Harry had described it, and Madam Pomfrey had agreed that it should be theirs until they were finished with it. She, too, having been forewarned by Snape, knew what needed to happen. Draco half wondered if something hugely bad had happened that no one wanted to tell him about, or if they were just being cautious.

They sat down in a small, cushy divan. Draco pulled his knees up to his chest and Harry faced him, sitting cross-legged. "So, where to start," he said.

"Start with you," Draco said, as he'd planned to. "I want to know what was going on at your end. The Ministry. All that. Then get to the war itself."

"Okay," Harry said. "Well. You knew that Ron and Hermione and I were assigned to track down these spells and to dismantle them. After that first time, when we tripped one of the intruder alert alarms, we kept noticing that strange things seemed to happen around us. Hermione thought I was being too suspicious, but I thought someone was trying to kill us. Which would make sense. But they were especially targeted at me. Which also makes sense, I guess, but still. You would think that the spy wouldn't have known whether Ron or I would be the first to walk into the gents that day, or whatever. It was like they were watching us all the time, or could even predict where we'd end up everyday. It was scary. I kept getting myself cursed, hexed, jinxed - you name it. Shelves would collapse on my head, or I'd suddenly get a scar attack right as I was in a doorway or something, and then the door would slam in my face. It was like there were ghosts all around."

Draco was listening intently. He'd been waiting *months* to hear this, and didn't want to interrupt, so he kept quiet.

"And Ron and Hermione kept getting hit by stuff, too, but never as bad - although Ron stumbled into a trip jinx that broke his ankle one day. Anyway, Dumbledore kept sending Aurors to check on us and stuff, and it got even worse when they were around - like the spy was pissed off that we were getting the extra help, or something. There were a *lot* of spells, like someone had been there for months, just setting them in place. As it turns out, there *was* someone there for months. The spy was impersonating a little old man who used to share Arthur Weasley's cubicle, Nigel Perkins. He was a nice man. But he died, and the spy somehow knew about it - we don't even know if the spy killed him, or if he just died of old age. Anyway, the Ministry never knew the difference, and the spy was polyjuicing himself as Perkins since about a week into July."

"The end of June?" Draco repeated, unable to contain his curiosity. "Right after Hogwarts graduation?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "That's because the spy was a Hogwarts student. It was Blaise Zabini."

Draco was both shocked and confused. "*What*?! You can't be serious! He was at training camp with Voldemort, wasn't he?"

Harry looked grim. "Yeah, he was," he said. When Draco realized he was looking even more confused, Harry went on. "Remember how they thought he was mentally unstable?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Well, it's because Zabini had been splitting himself into two people since about December or January of our seventh year," Harry said. "Part of him was already training in secret with Voldemort, and part of him was still at school."

Draco shook his head. "But those spells are *really* hard to pull off," he said. "And hard to maintain, and very dangerous!"

"I know," Harry said darkly. "Part of what keeps the - the speller, I guess - going is actually, uh, sexual activity. And it apparently helps if they're getting it from the same source on a consistent basis. Hence his obsession with you. Which, granted, I can understand even outside this context." He smiled at Draco, and continued. "What they've guessed is that he assumed from the beginning that you wouldn't be interested, and just got it wherever he could, hoping to find someone nearby to keep getting it from. When you talked to Snape, he probably freaked out, thinking that Snape

would figure out what he was really up to. But then something changed, probably my fault, by the way, not yours, and you and he hooked up that first time. That did it - Zabini decided that he was tired of getting anything less than you, and set his sights there. The second time you were together - if you'd done more than let him suck you off, he might have had enough power to keep going for longer. And you'd have been in danger of falling prey to him, too. That's what Snape said, at least."

Draco shivered without realizing it. Harry saw, though, and took his hands. "But it's okay," Harry assured him. "That didn't happen."

"It almost did," Draco said, staring at their hands. "He wanted me to fuck him. And I almost did, Harry. But when it came to it - I couldn't. And *that* was because of you. I know that."

Harry's face softened. "Even then?"

"Even then," Draco said quietly.

Harry pushed Draco's knees out of the way and pulled him forward, kissing him very gently. "Don't think about it any more," he said. "Anyway, there it was - Zabini was living two lives. The spy part had finished his training at the same time as the student part finished his education. Then he had a week together, getting stronger, and they guess that he was probably at the training camp entirely then. But then whatever happened with Perkins happened, and Zabini split again and the spy was installed at the Ministry. He basically laid spells all summer before anyone started to notice. The student half kept up with the training camp. That's the part we captured. The best part is, if they'd ever made up their minds to send him to St. Mungo's, the Healers probably would have figured it out. But Snape and Dumbledore's compassion did them in, I guess."

Something else flickered in Harry's eyes at the mention of Dumbledore's name, and suddenly, Draco wanted to get to that part. "Go on," he said. "What happened? How did you catch Zabini?"

"He died, actually," Harry said.

Draco was startled. "What? How?"

"He got too weak," Harry said. "Probably going too long without sex, or even contact with you.

We think he let himself be captured that time, that he needed you to find him. Voldemort and Lucius had probably been the ones to devise the plan all along, and they probably knew how far they could push him until it went too far. But either way, they clearly didn't care enough about him, since they *had* you in their hands by the time Zabini died. He died sitting at Perkins' desk one day. Mr. Weasley noticed, obviously, and while he was waiting for the authorities to come and take the body away, the polyjuice wore off."

"But - what about his other half?" Draco asked, thoroughly confused. "Where was the student half?"

"Fighting," Harry said seriously. "The war had broken out, remember? There were tunnels all over London, under Gringotts, under Diagon Alley, under the Ministry - I'll take you to see them sometime; they're being left as a war memorial; so many people died down there. All the battles took place underground - except the last one."

Harry's face clouded again, and Draco looked at him sharply. Harry didn't notice, though, and went on. "So, Perkins died at his desk, and suddenly Zabini the Death Eater died under Knockturn Alley. He couldn't handle being too close to his other half without being merged again, so that half was never near the Ministry. If that makes any sense."

"So, that was before the Ministry was evacuated?" Draco asked, trying to get it all straight.

"Same day," Harry said. "The uproar over Zabini was the final straw. They had no idea if he was just one spy, or if there were tons and tons. For all we knew, *Fudge* could have been a spy. And since the game was off, they figured that the other spies, if there were any, would go crazy and start killing people all over the place. There was no way to know. They evacuated right away. So, Ron and Hermione and I finally got taken off the assignment. We spent some time in our barracks, just waiting for a new assignment, and that was when Hedwig never came back. I knew things were awfully dark for you. We kept losing people in your area. Now we know it's because the Death Eaters had that fortress I mentioned, just north of where you were last, before you were captured. Most of those people survived, but it was pretty grim. I never saw it, but Snape did."

"Divert for a second and tell me about Snape and the twins," Draco said. "What did they do after I'd disappeared?"

"Went crazy looking for you," Harry said soberly. "They looked all over the place, used tracing charms like mad. Snape stumbled into one that he realized was a tracing spell on you. It was the

same one that you guys used to track Lucius. It seems that he used it on you. So, then Snape wanted to find the Manor, but Dumbledore said it wouldn't be possible to find. It seems that he had a theory that the wards would keep anyone from finding it, especially if there were any living Malfoys left. So, instead, Snape and the twins sent out more tracing charms and ended up finding the fortress instead. Snape was torn - he didn't want to leave you, but there were people dying inside. He told Dumbledore about it, and he and Lupin both got assigned, with the twins as their back-ups, to check it out and find the best way to attack it. Once they had, the Ministry sent a team in and got the prisoners out. That pretty much took them right up until the last battle."

"A quick question," Draco said slowly. "Do you know anything about my mother? What became of her? All I know is that she wasn't at the Manor when I left. I have no idea if she was there before, if she knew I was there, anything."

Harry winced slightly. "Did you know she was a Death Eater?"

"Oh, sure," Draco said. "I just wondered where she turned up, if anywhere."

"Snape and Lupin found her at the Tay Fortress," Harry told him reluctantly, watching him with an anxious look on his face. "She - didn't survive the storming."

"Ah." Draco nodded. "Was she helping with the torture?"

"Quite," Harry said, with another wince.

Draco nodded. It was no worse than he'd expected. "I assumed she was dead. I just wonder how it had happened. Thanks for telling me." He shifted slightly. "And you? What happened next?"

Harry sighed. "We got sent to the tunnels," he said. "Always back near Dumbledore, just trying to get at Voldemort. And *he* wasn't even present half the time - probably off at the Tay Fortress sometimes, and other times, maybe at the Manor. I wanted to join Snape, looking for you, and he was even willing to take me along - but Dumbledore insisted that the sooner we got rid of Voldemort, the sooner we be *able* to rescue you. As it turns out, he was right." Harry stopped here, and sighed heavily.

And Draco knew. It hadn't been a dream, after all, but a random visitation of clairvoyance. He shifted over, draping his legs across Harry's, their fingers still intertwined. "Tell me," he said

quietly.

Harry's eyes flickered up. "The wards are tied to your family's blood," he said soberly. "We couldn't have gotten at them until you left the Manor. Even so, they're still standing, but Snape and Moody figured out what sort of ward spells they are. Now, only you have the power to remove them. Whenever you're ready, that is. And then, the property is legally yours, to do whatever you like with it. I didn't believe Dumbledore, though. I thought he was being a coward, and selfish, willing to risk you just to get his war finished. I *knew* his intentions were good, deep down. I did. And I was horrible to him."

Draco said nothing, just squeezed Harry's hands.

Harry squeezed back, his face troubled, and went on. "The last battle happened just outside of London. Voldemort sent an invitation. All the remaining Death Eaters were there, including your father."

"When was that?" Draco asked suddenly, interrupting. "In relation to the day of the party, I mean."

"Well, it ended, let's see - three days before that," Harry said. "In the morning. It had gone all night. Why?"

"Never mind, for now," Draco said intently. "Go on."

"It was huge," Harry said. "I just remember tons of confusion and everybody running every which way. Eventually, though, there weren't many people left between me and Voldemort. Dumbledore and Lucius were duelling. Lucius was trying to wound me badly enough that I wouldn't have stood a chance against Voldemort, and Dumbledore was spending every bit of his energy trying to protect me. And then Dumbledore got hit by one of the curses meant for me. It was too much for him. It wasn't fair, even - Lucius sent two spells at him at once, and then another one before Dumbledore could react. He was so much older than Lucius, that's all. It had already been a really long night. I should have done more to cover him, but I had Dolohov to deal with, too, and I just couldn't be everywhere, I guess. In the end, uh, I got Lucius."

Harry stopped. Draco waited. "You mean, you killed him?" he asked softly.

Harry nodded, looking down.

Draco took a deep breath and put his arms around Harry. "Don't you dare feel badly about it," he said roughly, kissing Harry's jaw. "I'm gladder than anyone that that bastard's dead. I'm *glad* it was you. It's fitting. If I couldn't have done it myself, then you're the next best thing to that."

Harry's arms came up then and gripped him tightly. "Okay," he said, very quietly.

"Keep telling," Draco said, releasing him, but taking Harry's hands again.

"I don't really remember it that clearly," Harry said, his eyes getting a faraway look. "All I know is that suddenly, I saw Dumbledore fall, and I thought he was dead. And then I - I shot the *Avada Kedavra* at Lucius, and it worked. I was shocked, but it did. And then I knew I could do it, and had to. Voldemort hesitated, and if he hadn't, I'd probably be dead. He was staring at Lucius like he couldn't believe I'd actually killed him. And then I just did the same thing." Harry stopped and took another deep breath.

Draco could feel the pulse in Harry's wrists, racing. "And then you went to Dumbledore and watched him die," he said, hardly above a whisper.

Harry looked at him, his eyes searching Draco's. "You knew," he said. It wasn't a question.

"I saw it. I dreamed it. I didn't know if it was real or not until a moment ago." Draco shrugged. "I don't know how it happened."

Harry's face didn't move at all. "When?"

"Right when it happened," Draco said. "In the morning, three days before the party."

Harry shut his eyes then. "Then you know what I said to him," he said, his voice strained as though his throat was tight.

Draco shook his head. "I probably would've said it, too. Don't beat yourself up over it."

"He was right, there was no way I could have found you before we got Lucius out of there, and he died knowing I wasn't going to forgive him and that I was angry with him." The pain in Harry's voice tumbled out with the words, and Draco suddenly realized how long Harry had been holding it in. He probably hadn't talked to anyone about this yet.

He moved closer again, pulled Harry back to him. His cheek pressed to Harry's wild hair, Draco said, "He knew you would find me. He would have known that I could escape once they were all gone."

"If you weren't *dead* already," Harry choked out, clinging to him.

Draco couldn't think of anything to say to that, so he just hugged harder, one hand smoothing over Harry's hair. Something occurred to him. "Have they had a funeral for him already? Did we miss it?"

"No," Harry said tightly. "They wanted to wait until I could come, and I wasn't going to come until *you* could come. And besides, I wasn't going to leave you. They've already buried him, but there'll be a memorial service."

"Then we'll go together," Draco said. "And we'll go and find the place where he's buried, and we can both tell him that it's okay. Okay?"

Harry took a deep, shuddering breath. "Okay," he said, his voice small.

Draco pushed his fingers into that hair, relishing its softness. "I love you," he said firmly. He didn't know why; it just seemed like the thing to say.

Harry groped for him as though blind. "Draco - "

They were kissing, and it was all okay, because they'd come through it, and they were together. It had obviously been a burden for Harry, carrying all of this by himself, and Draco suddenly realized that the wait had been for Harry's benefit, too. He needed Draco for it, to be strong enough to help him bear it. They were kissing almost frantically, as though they couldn't possibly get enough of each other. And Draco was fine with that, too.

* * *

A week later, Draco was released from the Hospital Wing permanently. He had a small regimen of potions to take with him, but he'd promised to take them faithfully. And to let Snape look him over every so often. They moved into their room at Grimmauld Place, along with Weasley and Granger, and a few other odds and ends from their trainee group. Harry was already talking about finding a flat in London. "A home of our own," he'd said. And Draco had smiled and said nothing, just kissed him.

Snape and Lupin were often there, though Snape was at Hogwarts during the day. He did not take kindly to commentary on his relationship with Lupin, but had admitted at last, to Draco alone, that he was "extremely pleased" with how things were going. Extremely pleased, Draco had repeated, amused. Well, for anyone else, that would have been a declaration of eternal love, so he supposed Snape was truly happy. And that pleased him. He deserved it.

* * *

The memorial service for Dumbledore was over. Draco and Harry had already made their planned visit to the graveyard in Tunbridge Wells, where Dumbledore's family were all buried. Harry had stumbled through his apology, his hand gripping Draco's tightly throughout. Draco had spoken, too, feeling awkward, and thanked Dumbledore for getting them through the war. It was alright, now. Something had been exorcised, and it was over.

Snape came over to them after the service. The Great Hall was crowded with all sorts of people, and Draco was half-surprised that Snape had even managed to find him at all. "Are you ready?" he asked, with notably lack of preamble.

Draco nodded, his mouth tightening. "Yeah. Let's get it over with."

"Where's Moody?" Harry asked.

"Meeting us in the Entrance Hall," Snape said curtly. "Let us go."

They left, evading the media neatly, thanks to a timely application of the Disillusionment spell.

Snape had them Apparate to a place close to where the front gates of Malfoy Manor were. The same meadow was there, and Draco felt a shudder of horror run through him at the sight. Harry felt it, and held his hand in an almost bone-crushing grip. Snape told him what to say, and after Draco had said it, Snape and Moody repeated something similar, wands pointed at the empty space in front of them.

It was one of the oddest things Draco had ever seen; the Manor rippled into sight like a mirage. All of its other features - the orchard, just visible behind the back left corner of the house, the well, the front gates and drive, the scattering of outbuildings around the other side all appeared as well. Draco realized he was squeezing just as hard, back, and that his heart was pounding.

Not in a scary, nerve-attack way, but still. There was something terrifying about the thought of going in there. Snape shot him a penetrating, diagnostic look. "Come," he said, after a moment. "The rest of the wards must be taken down from inside."

Draco took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay."

He and Harry followed Snape. Moody trailed behind them, "just to be safe," he growled, wand still out, magical eye flashing all around them.

The house was silent as a tomb. Quiet as it had been the last time he'd been there. They walked through the main floor. Draco stopped dead, though, when he caught sight of the door leading down to the cellars, and beyond, the dungeons. "No further," he said, his jaw tight. "I'm not going another step. Let's get the wards down, get any of the elves, and go."

All three of his companions agreed at once, Snape uncharacteristically quiet. Moody volunteered to fetch the house-elves. Snape explained the spells needed for Draco to remove the rest of the wards. With Harry standing right beside him, still gripping his left hand, Draco withdrew with wand again and released the Manor from any and all protecting spells. No one said anything in the ensuing silence.

Moody returned with only Tandy. "The rest appear to be gone," he said gruffly. "Hope they found somewhere decent to go. This one was apparently hoping her Master Draco would come back."

Draco let go of Harry's hand and took a step forward. "Hello, Tandy," he said quietly.

She looked terribly frightened. Moody would do that to anyone, really. Her teeth chattered, and she appeared to be at a loss as to what to say.

"Tandy," Draco said firmly, "it's alright. Master Lucius is dead, and you don't need to stay here. Would you like to be freed?"

Tandy blinked in confusion. "Wh-what is Master Draco saying?"

"Probably not," Harry murmured.

"Clothes?" Draco suggested.

The eyes widened even further. "Is - is Tandy in trouble?" Tears began to well.

"No!" Draco assured her hastily. "Would you… like to work somewhere were there are lots of elves? It's where Dobby works now," he added, hoping that might convince her.

Another blink. "Dobby? Is Dobby working at Hogwarts?" Tandy asked.

Draco was surprised that she knew. But then, house-elves were very mysterious creatures. "Yes," he said. "Would you like that?"

Tandy twisted the hem of her tea towel with long fingers. "Tandy is… liking that," she said finally.

"Then it's settled," Draco said, with a smile. "This is Master Snape. He'll be taking you back to Hogwarts, alright?"

Confusion. "Then - Master Draco isn't staying here?"

"No," Draco said, very definitely. "Master Draco is never coming here again."

* * *

Draco dragged Harry outside while Tandy showed Moody and Snape to the dungeons. He didn't say anything, and neither did Harry. Harry wanted to see the well, so Draco took him to it. Neither of them spoke.

Eventually, Snape and Moody emerged, both looking extremely grim. Tandy trailed meekly out after them. Snape spotted them and walked over. "What will you do with it?" he asked bluntly.

Draco met his eyes calmly. "You'll see."

"It should be destroyed," Harry said fiercely.

Draco smiled and said nothing, but slipped his fingers back into Harry's.

Snape surveyed them both, looking very serious. "Very well," he said, after a bit. "I assume you will be returning to Grimmauld Place now?"

"Yes," Draco said. "Goodbye, Tandy. Thank you, again, for all your help."

Tandy beamed. "Tandy is helping?"

"Tandy saved my life," Draco said. "If you ever want something in return - just ask."

Tandy looked frightened and declined. Snape and Moody took her away.

Draco waited until they'd Disapparated before turning to Harry. "Will you help me with something?"

"Anything," Harry said at once, the fierceness still there, in his face and tone.

"I happen to agree completely," Draco said quietly, looking at the Manor's many windows, twinkling in the sunlight. "I want it destroyed. Help me burn it down."

Harry gave him a surprised look, but nodded. "Of course."

They gathered wood from the woodshed and arranged it around the house. Harry found some kerosene and they soaked it all quite thoroughly. It took awhile, but when it was done, Draco lit it on fire.

They retreated to the safety of the front gates and watched the fire blaze from out there, reclining in a short sofa that Harry'd conjured.

It burned for many hours, and when the foundations began to show at last, Draco pulled Harry to his feet. "Come on," he said. "What's down there - I don't ever want to see again."

Harry didn't say anything, just walked away with him.

* * *

"What do you think?" Harry asked. It was about the twelfth flat they'd seen that day, and they were both getting tired of looking.

Draco liked it, though. He couldn't really tell, at this point, whether that was just the desperation talking or if he really did like it, but it seemed alright. It was in the wizarding part of London, but a ways off the beaten track. The wizard showing them over it had retreated to the corridor to give them a moment to talk about it on their own. He'd no doubt recognized them and had been extremely deferential. Harry had said that he wondered how nice the man would have been, had they been any other two male wizards looking at one-bedroom flats together.

It was nice. Spacious, with a skylight in the kitchen, and light, hardwood floors over the rest of it. It was actually a two-bedroom, but they could use the smaller room as a study or something. There was also a fireplace, which Draco was currently eyeing with considerable interest. "Can we afford it?" he asked.

"Oh, sure," Harry said, waving this off. "It's a bit more than the others, but if you like it, it's ours."

"I like it," Draco said. "Do you like it?"

"I love it," Harry said, gazing around it again.

"Then let's get it." Suddenly, Draco was excited again. "Can we pay right away and move in?"

Harry laughed. "Probably," he said. "It doesn't come with this furniture, though - we'll have to go shopping. And they'll need to get it all out of here before they'll let us move in."

"I can wait," Draco said. "Let's go get him."

* * *

And just like that, they had a place to live that *wasn't* Grimmauld Place. As it turned out, Dumbledore had willed it to Harry, who in turn gave it to Lupin, to do with as he liked. "Feel free to sell it, if you don't want to live there," he said. "I don't care."

"After all I've done with it?" Lupin had inquired, in his usual, mild way. "I think not."

And so, that was that. They'd had a few days of purchasing furniture and having it Apparated in, which impressed Harry to no end. They were having even more fun arguing over where to put it all. Weasley and Granger had been dragooned into helping with the move, and Weasley like to opine, every so often, that he'd always known they wouldn't last, once they were living together. He was joking, apparently, but it always put a quick end to their arguments. Which Harry suspected was the point, all along. Draco wasn't so sure, but kept his doubts to himself.

Weasley had, however, redeemed himself greatly by virtue of his housewarming gift. Just before leaving, he'd gone all red and stuttered that he had something for them. "It's not the same, I know," he'd said hastily, not really meeting either of their eyes, "but I thought maybe - well - uh, here."

He'd turned around then and gone to the door where Granger was waiting outside. He took something from her and she came back in - having obviously Apparated away to get it and returning - Weasley held out a small owl cage with a very young-looking snowy owl.

Draco had been speechless. Beside him, Harry immediately choked up. "Oh, *Ron*," he said, staring at the tiny owl. "She's *beautiful*!" Draco didn't have to look at him to know that his lover's eyes had misted over. To be honest, he was having a little trouble with that, himself. Harry took the cage and held it up, showing Draco.

The little owl was preening. Her eyes were round and very amber, her feathers soft and still looking rather downy. She couldn't have been hatched more than three weeks ago. "She is," Draco agreed quietly, trying to negotiate the lump in his throat. He turned to Weasley, not even sure what to say. "Thank you," he said, meeting Weasley's eyes.

Weasley took his extended hand and gripped it, still scarlet in the face. Behind him, Granger was beaming, though her own eyes were wet. "I know it's not the same as having Hedwig," Weasley mumbled, "but I reckoned you guys would need an owl, and she was the only snowy the emporium had - I didn't know if you would want one so similar or not, but - "

Draco shook his head, cutting Weasley off. "It's perfect," he said quietly. "A perfect gift. Thank you."

Harry set the cage gently down on the table, then threw his arms around Weasley wordlessly, hugging the life out of his poor best friend. Who hugged awkwardly back, looking relieved. "So - you like her?" he hedged, looking at Harry apprehensively.

"She's perfect, like Draco said," Harry assured him, beaming through the tears in his eyes. "We'll have to name her, later."

Granger had taken the blushing Weasley away then, and left them on their own.

* * *

One day, it was all done. They moved in, and it was blissful. Draco emerged from the bedroom, where he'd just been making up the bed in the lovely new sheets he'd picked out, wonderfully expensive, deep blue, satin ones. Harry was crouched in front of the fire, concentrating on

lighting it in muggle fashion. It seemed to be lit already; he was just poking at it and adding bits of kindling underneath. Satisfied, he leaned back. Draco went and sat down beside him. "Nice," he said.

Harry's smile was brighter than the flames. He flung one arm over Draco's shoulder and dragged him in for a tooth-jarring kiss. "Here," he said, when it was done. "I opened the wine Hermione left for us."

Draco hadn't admitted that he'd been impressed with her choice, but accepted the glass from Harry gratefully. "Cheers."

"To us," Harry proposed. "To claiming our happily-ever-after at last."

Draco smiled fondly and clinked his glass against Harry's. "To us," he echoed, and drank.

Harry took a sip. "It's good," he said, sounding surprised. "This is what I was meant to be drinking at that party. I dropped it before I could try it, though."

Draco almost dropped his. "It is? Are you sure it's the same wine? Same vintage, even?"

Harry shrugged and laughed. "Vintage, I don't know. Same wine, though. Hermione told me. It's why she picked it."

"Nice," Draco said, touched and impressed. He took another sip. Harry wound their fingers together and leaned against him. Draco pressed a kiss to his head. They hadn't eaten in awhile, and he was already getting a light buzz from the wine. "So, *mon amour*," he said, swirling the wine about in its glass, catching dark, purply glints from the fire, "are you going to make mad, passionate love to me out here by the fire, or in our brand-new bed?"

Harry contemplated, gazing contentedly at him. "Who says we can't do both?"

Draco smiled. "No one," he said.

Harry's smile glittered. He took Draco's wine from him and carefully Banished both glasses to

the top of the mantle. Very slowly, they both lay back on the warm, false-fur rug, and Harry began to undo the buttons of his shirt. Draco lay there, perfectly happy to let him. Harry finished and pushed the halves of his shirt back off Draco's chest. "Alone at last," he said, eyes gleaming.

"I know," Draco said. There was such a difference between Silencing the space around you and actually having your own space. It was wonderful. Harry's hands stroked over his chest, thumbs massaging nipples, smoothing over his abdomen, unbuttoning the new, grey flannel trousers that Draco was still so pleased with. Harry simply undid the button, then returned to Draco's shirt, unbuttoning the sleeves and sliding it off Draco's body. He tossed it on the sofa nearby. Draco caught him by the front of his shirt and pulled him down, unable to wait. They kissed for a long moment, breathing growing heavier and heavier.

"You're far too clothed," Draco said, his breath too fast, and began to unbutton Harry's shirt. Harry grinned down at him, then stood and removed the rest of his clothes at light-speed.

"Faster this way," he said. "Get those trousers off, you."

Draco got to his feet, ripped off his socks and then everything else. There - they were together again, and Draco had grabbed Harry's glasses and placed them fumblingly on the mantle near the wine. It was a pleasant confusion of tangled of limbs as they sank back down to the rug, never once letting go of one another. Draco didn't care who topped or bottomed, he just wanted to be *with* Harry again. They'd only done this twice since his recovery now, in the relative privacy of their room in Grimmauld Place - and they had both been incredibly wonderful, really, but Draco was fairly confident that he wouldn't tire of it any time soon.

He pulled Harry over him in a silent indication of how the night would start, and Harry didn't argue. He'd had the foresight to have brought the lube (also quite new) out and left it on the mantle - and apparently grabbed it on their way back down to the rug. They were kissing and Harry's fingers were slick and slipping into him, and it both a pleasure and a pain, and Draco wouldn't have had it any other way. He lifted his hips and pulled Harry into him. Still kissing, they rocked back and forth, speaking only in breath, small sounds of need and desire and - eventually - joy. Harry's hands were on him as he came, and Draco squeezed his knees around Harry's rib cage, urging his lover's orgasm from him. Harry came with a cry, muffled by Draco's mouth, and it was complete and utter bliss.

They lay together, panting, until they'd recovered their breath, and then Harry wandlessly summoned the wine again. Still weak from his climax, the spell was a bit wobbly and some of Draco's wine ended up on him. Neither of them really minded, though; it only meant that Harry got to lick it off.

Once again, the wine got neglected as things heated up between them again. Later, when Draco had collapsed, panting, against Harry, he voiced his opinion that this was the best day he'd ever had. Harry laughed and drew him down for a kiss. And later still, Draco stood and moved the fireguard in front of the fire. "Let's go to bed," he said.

Harry followed him, and they slid between the satin sheets. The wine had be re-corked and put away, and they'd made the rounds in their new abode (nude), touching things and putting them away, saying goodnight to Nenya (a name Draco had chosen from his favourite books, the Lord of the Rings trilogy, which Harry hadn't read and which Draco was planning to read to him in the very near future), and gathering up their wildly-strewn clothing. Harry slid into bed beside him. "This is so… I don't know, I feel like an adult or something, now," he said.

Draco smiled happily. "I know, it's like playing house! I love it!"

Harry was full of laughter, and pulled Draco close to him. He was on his back, and Draco arranged himself on Harry's chest - the way they'd first slept together. "Welcome home," Harry said softly, with that little tremor in his voice that meant that he was feeling *particularly* Gryffindor at the moment.

Well, Draco wasn't complaining. "This *is* home," he said, insinuating one of his legs between Harry's. "You and me. This is the only home either of us has had since we got together."

Harry looked at him, and his face was so full of love that it made Draco's chest hurt. "Yeah," he agreed, one hand coming up to push Draco's tousled hair back from his face. "You're right. It is."

-fin-

A/N: A few notes. First of all, thank you to each and every one of you who read this far, for bearing with me, even through the dark bits, and reading through to the end. I hope more than I can say that you enjoyed the journey as much as I did. I've been living in this story for months now, and it's been intense.

Secondly, thank you so very much to all of you who left reviews and feedback along the way! If you left an email address while you reviewed, chances are good that I responded at some point. Thank you very, very much for your comments! The highlight of my day, many

a time! If you didn't leave an address, consider this my thank you to you, with particular thanks to Blondel, serenity chair, and kingzgurl, whom I was never able to contact personally, for your many reviews. Feedback like yours makes my day, so often!

Thirdly, thank you to all those many of you who left a comment or two along the way, I've appreciated those very much, too! :)

Thank you all! - SilentAuror