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Name: Welcome to the Real World
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Chapter 1 to 14

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Chapter: 1

Just a repost, in an attempt to space it out better. Hope this works.

Umm, yeah, so I don't own Harry Potter or anthing else affiliated to him or J.K. Rowlings. I doubt I'll be repeating this disclaimer, so just remember that applies to all later chapters as well. I'm not a sticklar for the 'facts of Harry Potter', so don't be surprised if I change around a few things from the book. This story has Harry and Draco 'falling in love' so if you don't like that... I tried to make it angsty and serious, but I have the tendency of making things come out sickeningly sweet, so you never know. Basically Harry starts a new life, Draco runs away from his, and both wonder if they might be better off facing the world together. I hope you like this story, but it's cool if you don't.

Draco Malfoy was cold, tired, and hungry. Strangely enough, he was realizing that it was the first time in his entire eighteen years of life that he had ever been any of those things. Oh, there had certainly been times when he'd left Hogwart's on a cool day without a cloak, and complained of being cold, just as there had been times when he'd spent too long studying and too little time sleeping, or woken up too late for breakfast. But none of those events compared in the slightest to the way he was feeling now. Presently, he could accurately describe the exquisitely painful cycle of being cold; first a tingling sensation that felt like tiny knives boring into the skin, the brief relief of going numb, the wind biting so harshly upon his body it felt like heat, and then a shiver that shook him right to the core to start the whole pattern over again, each time a little worse then before. Being tired before had always been something to welcome; the dulling of the senses and the promise of a few hours wrapped in warm oblivion. Now every hour he stayed awake seemed to add weight to his shoulders, forcing his body to bend with the pressure, to sway back and forth like a drunkard in time with the pounding in his head. He now understood why sleep deprivation was such a devastating form of torture, for even if there was time to lie down; he was too tired to sleep. And he could honestly say now that he knew what gnawing hunger, and its accompanying nausea and dizziness, felt like. These accurate definitions however, were definitely not wanted, and he cursed whoever had thought he needed such lessons.

" You win, okay? I'm humbled", Draco muttered to the sky, between his chattering teeth. Nobody answered of course, and Draco gave a weary sigh and continued to lift his frozen feet down the sidewalk. Having arrived in London, he had felt sure most of his trials were over. Now it seemed he might be on the verge of failing, and after coming so far…

Voldemort was dead. The all powerful, dark wizard who had sought domination of the magic and muggle world alike had been destroyed. He had been dead for nearly two years, and still people were dealing with the aftermath of a brief yet destructive war. Or so was his understanding. Draco Malfoy had spent the better part of the last few years a prisoner in his own home. Having openly defied his father, Lucius Malfoy, by refusing to become a Death eater, and by remaining at Hogwart's where the side of light had based itself, he had made himself his father's enemy. Seeing the way the war was going, Lucius had wisely distanced himself from Voldemort, so that when the evil wizard finally fell, there had been nothing to pin on Lucius at all. A few fines, a slap on the wrist, and Lucius Malfoy had gone back to his mansion, and taken his wayward son with him. What everyone did not realize was that there was no end to Lucius' ambition. He planned to take Voldemort's place and succeed where the other had failed, and he wanted Draco at his side when he did so. Lucius had every confidence in his ability to beat any resistance out of Draco. It was join him or die.

Lucius had been patient. He had many other things to consider then the tearing down and rebuilding of his only son, so mostly Draco had been restricted to a small bare room, with no wand, no distractions, and nothing to do. The occasional act of abuse from Lucius had almost been a relief as at least it was a release from the monotony. Then, sometime early yesterday morning, a surprising development. His mother.

" Mother", Draco asked incredulously, certain his eyes were playing tricks on him. In all the time he had been in this room, though his mother was but a few hallways away, this was the first visit she had ever made.

" Draco", she acknowledged. A guard stood behind her in the open doorway, in case Draco decided to try and break out. There was little chance of that – Draco had been fed, but just enough to keep him alive, not to keep him healthy. He doubted he could walk, never mind run. It was all part of Lucius' 'reform' scheme. Narcissa Malfoy turned and glanced coolly at the guard,

" Leave", she said simply, closing the door in his face.

" What are you doing here?" Draco asked.

" Will you join your father?" she asked. Her bored tone suggested she cared little for either Lucius' latest attempt at power, or Draco's involvement in it.

" No", Draco said. With a sneer he added, " I would have thought that was pretty obvious by now. It's been two years".

" Two years? Has it been so long?" Narcissa said out loud. She shrugged, " I suppose it has." She paused again, and Draco laid his head back against the mattress of his cot and stared at the ceiling, waiting for her to get around to the point of her visit.

" I know I'm not much of a mother. I've never felt any maternal fondness for you, as I'm sure you're aware. It is not anything you've done. To be fair, I feel no particular warmth towards anyone at all. I have no traumatic past to blame this on, and it was not something I was trained to do, but I know nonetheless that I have very little by way of emotion. It has done you harm though, and for that I feel… I regret it."

Draco was stunned, his mouth opening and closing, but incapable of sound. He glanced at his mother and saw that she was inspecting her nails, which seemed more important to her then the confession she was making.

" I am not expecting forgiveness, and I'm not asking for any. However, there is one thing I can do for you, and I ask that you trust me."

" I do trust you. You may have faults, but you have never lied to me", Draco said.

" Your father is coming down today to ask if you're ready to join his little rebellion."

" He's done that before and you've never came", Draco said.

" This time, when you say no, he'll kill you."

There was no tremor in her voice as she pronounced his fate, and no change in her expression, just a slight flickering moment of disproval in her eyes. Draco sucked in a painful breath, followed by another, and another, until the swirling thoughts of his brain quieted.

" I don't want to die", he said softly. The omission was surprising, even to himself. What did he really have to live for?

" I thought not", Narcissa said. " I've come to get you out. You understand I had very little time to prepare, and besides I've never been very good at planning things, so my help will be limited."

" My wand?"

" I don't have it", Narcissa said. She crooked one long, elegant finger at her son, and beckoned to him. She opened the door, and stepped over the guard, whose drink she had poisoned before speaking to Draco. The man was dead – not what she had intended but she was no expert on potions and it was a small matter either way. Draco gulped, and exited his room, following his mother. His eyes darted about, adjusting poorly to the gloom. He imagined he saw Lucius everywhere, and his heart was racing so fast he could scarcely breathe, but Narcissa led him

efficiently through the maze of corridors, avoiding all witnesses with ease. Draco found himself in front of a set of cellar doors, which he knew were near the forest on the edge of Malfoy property.

" Here is a broom – I couldn't get yours without raising suspicion. Some money, I am sorry it's not much, but the finances have always been under your father's control."

" Food?"

" I didn't think of it", she said with a shrug.

" It's okay", Draco said.

" You'd better take this cloak, as it's rather cold outside. It's January, in case you didn't know. I won't ask you where you're going – it will be safer for us both that way. Besides, I'll always be easy to track down, if absolutely necessary". The way she said it clearly meant she expected no further communication from him – ever.

Draco pulled the black cloak around his shoulders, and hoped its warmth would be enough. He pushed open the cellar doors and peered out. A faint dusting of snow covered the ground, and the rooftops of the manor. The sky was grey and there was a brisk wind blowing down from the north. Draco filled his lungs with the fresh air, and felt a tiny flickering of hope. Maybe, he really could escape and be free. He managed a smile for the diminutive woman at his side,

" Good-bye, mother. Be well", he said gently, knowing there was nothing else she could give him, and surprised she had done as much as she had. With a brief nod, and another glace outside to assure there were no observers, he kicked off from the ground, and flew towards the cover of the woods.

Narcissa Malfoy surprised herself by staring out at the woods long after her son was out of sight. Abruptly, she shut the cellar doors, and locked them. She returned to her sitting room, and ordered a house elf to bring her a cup of tea. Draco was miles away when Narcissa drank the last drop of her tea, the delicate china cup falling to the ground and breaking into pieces, as the poison she had made ran swiftly through her system. Long before Lucius discovered the escape, Narcissa Malfoy was dead.

Draco Malfoy knew the only place he had any chance of escaping from his father was in the muggle world, for his father had far too many contacts in the wizarding world who would gladly turn him in. As he turned his broom in the direction of London proper, he thought it was merely because it was the closest large city. After journeying through the bitterly cold sky for most of the day, it had come to him that he had chosen London for a specific reason. He was going to find the one person who might possibly help him. After all, Harry Potter had saved the world, what was one more soul to him?

Draco had flown into London late in the evening, the darkness suitable cover for his broomstick

he had rationalized. The sudden drop in temperature however, soon forced him out of the sky, as his hands could no longer grip the rough broom handle. His landing was poor due to his exhaustion, and he all but tumbled to the ground, as his legs refused to support him. He took a moment to regain the wind that had been knocked out of him, and then looked around. A light showed him he was in someone's back garden. He pushed into a nearby tool-shed, covered himself with some empty grain sacks for warmth, and tried to sleep. After only a few uncomfortable hours, Draco roused himself, and went exploring, hoping to find some food. He broke off an icicle and sucked on it, wincing as the ice cut into his already frozen fingers. He had only gone a few blocks, when he realized he was lost, and though he spent the next hour trying to find where he had spent the night, he had to give it up for a lost cause. He tried to console himself with the fact that he wouldn't have been able to fly his broomstick anymore, anyway, and that the less magic he used, the harder he would be to trace.

" Now I just have to concentrate on finding Potter", Malfoy muttered, still trudging down the sidewalk. It was crucial that he concentrate on his goal, and not upon the feelings of panic and fear that swam in his veins like a toxin, for if he gave into the darkness now, he would not survive long enough to see Harry. And nothing was more important then that.

Draco was in an area of town devoted mostly to housing, which wasn't very promising. If Draco had been capable of thinking clearly yesterday, he would have landed nearer to some commercial area, where the likelihood of running into someone of the magical persuasion who could lead him to Potter was far more likely. Any one of these houses could be a wizard's home, but there was no way of knowing which. He began to cross a street when a loud, blaring, noise made him take a hasty step back.

" Watch it!" Yelled a man from a large automobile, as the vehicle sped past. Draco gaped, never having seen such a contraption, wondering how it moved.

" You alright, love? You look a wee bit lost", said a voice.

Draco turned, and saw a middle-aged woman with fading brown hair, and kindly brown eyes looking at him. She had a large canvas bag, empty, slung over one shoulder, sensible leather boots, a long overcoat, and thick red mittens. His first impulse was to run, wondering if he had already been recognized. He struggled for calm.

" I need to find Harry Potter", he said hoarsely.

" Harry Potter? Hmm, I don't think I know that name and I know most of my neighbours. Are you sure he's on this street?"

Draco stared at her in utter disbelief. Everyone knew Harry, didn't they? How was it possible she didn't know who Harry Potter was? ' He's the dark haired, green-eyed, Boy-Who-Lived, who destroyed the greatest evil this world has probably ever known, that's who he is you moron', he felt like yelling. Then another thought struck him, was it possible that Harry truly was as un-famous as he claimed he was in the muggle world? He had thought the story part of Harry's

modesty, or at least, greatly exaggerated. Draco paled. How was he going to find Harry, if nobody knew whom he was?

" I… don't know", Draco managed to say. His customary eloquence had deserted him sometime during his seclusion, his confidence long before that. He could barely manage to look this most unthreatening of muggles in the eye, instead he looked around constantly, jumping at shadows. His mind dredged up a lie, that he desperately willed her to believe. " I was supposed to meet him, but we must have got the times messed up because he never showed, so I thought I'd try to find his place on my own."

" Oh dear, and on such a cold day too. Have you his address or his number?"

Number? Draco didn't know what she meant, and thought if he asked it might make his flimsy story look even more suspicious.

" I lost it, with the rest of my belongings", Draco said. He blushed convincingly, as though he were truly embarrassed by his incompetence, and not deathly afraid of being forever lost on the streets of London.

" Oh how perfectly dreadful! I bet it was one of those horrible airline flights; they always lose your baggage. So here you are a stranger to London," she paused slightly waiting for confirmation and Draco nodded, " Without a thing. A terrible ordeal. Well not to worry, dear, we'll figure something out."

The woman had pressing business, for which she apologized profusely, and hadn't much time to spare for Draco. Still, she managed to get him set up at the local library, in front of the large reference directories, and even jotted down her phone number on a scrap of paper, just in case he had still not found any place to spend the night.

Now that he had grown accustomed to the talkative woman, who seemed to take his odd dress and silent manner in stride, he was upset she was leaving. He said simply, " Thank you."

" Oh, it ain't nothing." The woman said, blushing slightly. " Good luck finding your friend. Oh, and I almost forgot. I'll leave these with you, you're hands look positively frozen!"

She pulled off her mittens and left them on the table in front of Draco's chair. Draco fingered the warm wool, and wished he had remembered to get the woman's name. He stared at the phone number the woman had given him, and tried to puzzle things out. She'd asked if he'd known Harry's number, did all muggles have this identification code then? But he was to 'call' it if hadn't found a place by this evening. It couldn't be a spell or an invocation, so what were the numbers good for? A man walked out of a door marked lavatories, and Draco jumped up from his chair, the puzzle momentarily forgotten in his eagerness. Here was something truly useful, and he used the facilities, which were very similar to the ones he was used to, and ran endless amounts of hot water over his hands and face. He looked at his face in the mirror, and was slightly startled that the image didn't speak back. Maybe that was a blessing, as he looked like

death warmed over. His hair was straggly and in need of a cut, not to mention a cleaning. He tried to wet it down, but the difference was negligible. Draco's lips were blue, and he was fairly certain his throbbing ears were frostbitten. His entire face looked gaunt and sallow, and there were dark hollows around his reddened eyes. His hands were red and chapped, and the fingers stiff and swollen. He didn't even dare look at his feet.

Eventually he returned to his table, and curled into the worn but soft chair. He felt his eyelids drooping and wondered what the punishment was for falling asleep where he was. He spotted an elderly man by the windows with his chin tucked into his chest, snoring gently, and let his own eyes close. The sound of a book thumping against the table woke Draco later from a thankfully dreamless sleep.

" Sorry", said a girl about his own age, who was sitting down at the far edge of the table he was at. She indicated the pile of books in front of her with an apologetic smile, " Exams. Think I can learn an entire term in two days?"

Draco merely nodded mutely, thinking that it was a comment he had heard commonly at Hogwart's. It was comforting to learn that some things didn't change – poor study habits for one. The girl giggled softly, and then focused her attention back on her work. Draco rubbed the sleep from his eyes and yawned. ' Right it's time you got to work, too Draco', he said to himself.

The woman had put a series of huge books in front of him, suggesting he might find his friend in them, and then he could call him up. So far he had nothing but questions, but he was reasonably assured of his intelligence, and he would figure things out eventually. Too bad that his time was running out; too much longer and he would fall victim to the pain inside. He opened the first book and found it filled with hundreds and thousands of names. Even better, they were arranged alphabetically. He looked for Harry, but soon realized that last names came first. He moved to the P section, and was dismayed to find about twenty Harry Potter listings. Were they all for the same person? No, they all had a different set of numbers listed next to them. Some of the names even had addresses printed out neatly next to them. Well, he supposed twenty, actually twenty-eight if you included all the Potter, H., listings in the tally as well, was better then searching through all of London. He looked around for a quill or pencil to write the names down, but saw nothing. The girl looked up from her textbook and handed him a blue pen and a sheet of paper.

" Here, you can borrow these", she said. Draco said thank you, and when her attention was back on her book, examined the strange items. He soon found out the pen didn't need ink as it was already held inside the pen itself. The colour was a tad disconcerting, but it was much neater then his usual quill, and he loved the fact that he didn't get even the smallest dab of ink on his fingers as he wrote.

He copied down every name meticulously, including the addresses and the numbers. When he was finished he handed the girl back her pen.

" Thanks for… letting me use this. I need to keep the paper, if that's alright", he said. The girl

laughed.

" Of course, and you can keep the pen too if you want. You'll probably need it if you're going to make all those calls."

" Pardon me?"

" All those phone numbers for a…" she squinted her eyes at the page and tried to figure out Draco's elaborate handwriting, " Harry Potter? If you're going to give all of those people a telephone call, then you'd better cross out the ones that are wrong after, or you'll soon forget. I know, because I do that all the time. I'm forever losing people's numbers."

" Do you know where I can make these… telephone calls?" If the girl noticed that he stuttered over the unfamiliar words, she didn't say anything.

" Hmm, the pay phone in the entrance is broken, but there's another one down the street, on the corner."

Draco nodded, " Thanks, I really appreciate it." He tied his cloak around his shoulders a little tighter, slipped on the fire-red mittens, placed the pen and paper in an inside pocket, and stood up to leave.

" You're a little bit odd, aren't you?" she said, indicating his outfit. Worried at first that she suspected something, he was relieved to discover that she was only teasing him.

" You know what exams do to you". She laughed and Draco left. He took note of the contraption in the Library's entrance that had an out of order sign taped to it. The word telephone was written above it in bright blue letters, and there was even a list of instructions on how to use it.

It seemed a little too convenient, and Draco was still tired despite his nap, and monstrously hungry. He was also scared. Scared of being alone with no resources, scared of someone catching him and taking him back, and scared that he was never going to amount to anything in a world that was so different from his own. In this world, he was truly nobody. In this world, if he couldn't even do something simple like find Harry Potter, how was he going to achieve anything?

The weather had slightly improved when he stepped outdoors, and the mittens kept his fingers much warmer. He spotted the telephone box, and watched as someone ahead of him entered inside, rummaged in their pockets, pushed what looked to be a coin into the machine, lifted up a slightly L-shaped thing, placed it over his ear and mouth, and then pushed a whole series of buttons. Draco watched with rapt attention, wondering what would happen next. The man in the phone book suddenly grinned, and started speaking rapidly. He waited, obviously listening, and then spoke again. After the man had finished, Draco approached the box and hesitantly entered, half expecting the doors to lock behind him. The first instruction said to place coins in slot, and

Draco groaned. He needed money, and he doubted very much that they accepted galleons and such in the muggle world. How on earth was he to get a few coins to run the telephone? He stepped out of the booth, and slowly began to walk, always keeping the location of the library in his mind, just in case. He entered a street lined with stores, and sat down on a bench to think things through.

He noticed another funny machine placed in the side of a wall. People queued behind it, slid in a little plastic card, punched some more numbers, and out came, of all things, money. He watched quite a few people go through the procedure, and was startled out of his thoughts by a tap on the shoulder.

" Best be moving along now, son", said a gruff voice. It was a tall man dressed in some kind-of uniform. " Makes people nervous to have someone staring at them as they get money from their accounts."

Draco flushed, realizing it did look very suspicious what he was doing. He couldn't very well explain that he had never seen a moneybox before either.

" Sorry, didn't mean to stare like that", he stammered. 'Stupid move, Malfoy, getting yourself noticed by muggle authorities your first day in London', he thought.

" I didn't think so, but I just thought I should give you a little nudge", the man said kindly.

Draco nodded and quickly walked down the street, looking back anxiously in case the man in uniform was following him. In his haste to put as much distance between himself and the moneybox, he quickly got lost in the seemingly endless number of streets and avenues. Bone weary, and on the verge of tears now that he had lost even the vague security of the public library, he came across a store that looked somewhat like the ones he was accustomed to. It had an old awning leaning out onto the street, some golden lighting shining from inside, and scrolling black lettering on the signpost reading 'Antiques'. In the window were poster-boards in bright colours, telling what the store had for sale. One particular sign drew his attention as it read: will pay money for interesting jewellery or collectibles. Draco looked down at the gold watch on his wrist, wondering if it qualified as interesting. In the wizarding world, it was a simple wind-up watch, made of gold, with gem chips in place of numbers. He knew muggles had watches that ran automatically. He'd seen one on a first year student once, and he'd stolen it to see how it worked. After taking the whole thing apart, he had found only something called a battery, and he still had no idea how the fool thing worked. In the end he'd convinced himself that muggle inventions were beneath him anyway, and had stuck with his wind-up version, even though it was really because he hated the fact that someone knew something he didn't.

Upon entering the store, tiny bells above the lintel began ringing, and a round little man came out from a back room.

" How can I help you today, young sir?"

" I saw you're sign, and was wondering if you'd buy my watch?" Draco unwrapped it from his wrist and held it out. The other man peered at the watch, turning it over in his hands,

" Wind-up is it? Excellent condition", the man muttered. " My name's Pat, by the way. Take a seat why don't you? Would you like some tea?"

Draco shrugged, not wanting to appear too eager. The man went into the back room, and soon came out with a tray. There was a silver tea service, and a package of ginger snaps. Draco eyed them hungrily, but tried to restrain himself as Pat poured him a cup of steaming tea. Pat opened the package of biscuits and popped one in his mouth. He then pushed them towards Draco, who took three out while Pat was occupied, and bit into one eagerly. Nothing had ever tasted so good, and before he had finished swallowing his first biscuit, he was already reaching for the package again. Pat didn't seem to mind, as he was still looking at Draco's watch.

" Are you sure you're willing to part with this?" Pat asked. Draco nodded, his mouth too full. He guiltily swallowed and tried to remember his manners. Pat looked him over and finally said, in a low voice,

" You'd be a wizard then?"

Draco choked. In a voice laced with terror, he spit out, " Of course not, what a ridiculous notion. Everyone knows there's no such thing." Lynching had been outlawed here, hadn't it? He hadn't heard of anyone recently being burned at the stake, but there was always the fear that news would get back to his father that a wizard had been uncovered in London.

" There have been more then a few magical folk who've come in here. I think they like the atmosphere."

" Oh", Draco said, relieved but still dejected. " And here I thought I was blending in so nicely."

" I'm sure nobody else has noticed. It's only when you know what you're looking for", Pat said.

" Please don't repeat what you know about me", Draco said. Just a few years ago, it would have come out as a demand, backed by a threat. Now, it sounded like a plea, and the wavering made his voice sound pathetically small, even to his own ears.

" You have nothing to fear from me", Pat said, who was wondering what could make a young man look so haunted; so hunted. He went and got another package of chocolate biscuits and gave them to Draco. Then he went on briskly, " I'll give you a hundred pounds for the watch. It may be worth more, but without a well-known maker, people won't want to take a chance on it."

" Okay", Draco said, having no idea how much a hundred pounds was, and not strong enough to argue anyway. How much did he need to make the telephone work? Pat seemed in no hurry to have Draco leave, and having trusted him so far, Draco thought he might as well press on. " I'm looking for a friend of mine. I don't know his phone number, but I copied down a list from a

book." He reached for his page and showed it to Pat. " Will a hundred pounds be enough?"

Pat laughed gently. " Easily. In fact, I'll let you use my phone for free", he said. He reached behind the counter and retrieved a black shiny telephone. He placed it in front of Draco and waited expectantly. Draco stared at the thing, willing it to work for him, and wishing this one had instructions on it like the other ones did.

" Have you never used a telephone before?"

Draco scowled, hating being so helpless, but was forced to admit that he was defeated.

" Right, well, it's quite easy. Lift up the receiver, and then push in the phone number on the keys. Might as well start with the top of your list, shall we? Now, only one of them is the Potter you want, and it's possible that your friend isn't even on the list, but we'll get to that later. Will you recognize his voice?"

" His voice?"

" Yes, that's how a telephone works. You dial the numbers, the person you want picks up his end of the telephone line, and you can talk to each other." Draco nodded in understanding.

" I'm not sure. It's been awhile", Draco admitted.

" Think of a question we can ask that will eliminate all the other's."

" Umm, 'is this the Harry Potter who attended Hogwart's school'? How about that?" Draco suggested.

" Perfect. I'll make the first call, show you how it's done", Pat said, and winked. Draco read the numbers off the page, and Pat dialled them. " Hello? I would like to speak with a Mr. Harry Potter please." A pause. " I'm looking for the Harry Potter who attended Hogwart's school." Another pause. " Thank you, and sorry to have disturbed you. Good-bye."

" So that wasn't him, obviously", Draco said. He took out the pen and scratched off the name. Pat handed him the receiver, and Draco went to work. With every phone call it got easier, though it was eerie talking to someone he couldn't see and didn't know. He was approximately two-thirds of the way through his list, with only a few people being out and unable to answer his question, and he was beginning to panic that he was approaching yet another dead end, when he got something he wasn't expecting.

The voice on the end of the phone said hello, but before he could answer back, the voice continued. " Hello, you've reached the home of Harry Potter. I'm not here right now, but if you leave you're name and number after the tone, I'll try to ring you back as soon as possible." There was a loud beep, and Draco's eyes widened in fear as he pushed the phone at Pat.

" What's the matter?" he asked. He held the receiver up to his ear and heard the telltale beep of an answering machine.

" The phone itself answered!" Draco said.

" It's an answering machine. It's so people can leave a message, if the person they're trying to reach isn't in."

" It's creepy", Draco said, and shivered.

" Do you think it was your friend though?"

Draco realized that he really hadn't listened properly as he'd been so surprised by the machine. He dialled the number again and listened, " Hello, you've reached the home of Harry Potter…"

" Indeed I have", Draco said quietly, not needing to listen to anymore of the message. The voice was slightly more mature then he remembered, but it was still soft, and almost hesitant or wistful. For the first time in two years, Draco felt a little safer as the voice washed over him. For some reason, he just knew Harry could make it all better for him.

" Well, he's not in, but I bet we can get his address from information." Pat used the phone and spoke to someone, eventually grabbing the pen and writing down an address. " There you are. Here's where he lives, but I'm afraid it's quite a ways from here. You're best to go by metro – the traffic now will be horrendous. You've probably never been on the underground either have you?"

" No".

" It can be a little confusing, but you've done fairly well already. Here, I've got a map here somewhere", Pat said. Pat found a map of the underground, and traced out Draco's route with the pen. He told him where to buy his ticket, where to get off and change trains, what side to be on when he arrived, and even told him to be wary of people trying to take his money. Draco felt the same way he had on his first day at Hogwart's – afraid, uncertain, and desperate not to show it. Pat gave Draco his money for the watch in small bills, and then led him outside the shop and pointed out the entrance to the underground.

" I don't know what to say", Draco said. " I've felt like that all day. People helping me, and me almost too afraid to let them. All I can manage is a pathetic thank you." Pat gave him a small sad smile, and told him to get going. As Draco walked, he felt ashamed for all the times he'd snottily referred to muggles in a less then kind way. He doubted if a lost muggle would have made out so well in his world.

Draco headed down the stairs and bought his ticket. He had some difficulty at the turnstiles, but he was getting good at observing people without seeming to and he had always been a fast learner. The first train he was on was packed with people, and Draco clutched his few

belongings to him tightly, fighting the feeling of dread that was gradually overwhelming him. Would overcome him if he couldn't find Harry. He was relieved to get off at the appropriate station, and distance himself for a moment from the press of people, and to be able to sort through his fears to find which ones were real and which ones lived entirely in the vaults of his mind. What if Potter didn't come home tonight for some reason? What if Potter refused to see him? Why was he going to Potter's anyway? And why was he so absolutely certain that he could trust him?

Trying to control himself, he looked again at the map Pat had given him, and followed the signs to the correct platform. The train that came this time contained only a few people, and Draco found a seat. He was scared he might fall asleep again, so he focused his eyes on the map, checking the stations they went past.

Two giggling girls, who were seated across and to the left at him, were eyeing him with somewhat predatory eyes. They reminded him of Pansy, and Draco unconsciously reached for his wand before remembering he didn't have one. The bolder of the two girls soon got up and plopped into the seat next to his.

" Where you headed?"

Draco held up his map, with Harry's address taped to the side of it.

" Oh, I know where that is. It's about a block west of where I live, but you should get off at the stop ahead of the one you've got circled", she said. Draco turned to really look at her, and decided she really wasn't much like Pansy, since this girl had managed to complete a reasonably intelligent sentence.

" I'm looking for a friend", Draco said. Funny, but he'd said the word 'friend' in connection with Harry so many times today that he was starting to believe it. He wondered how he would get Harry to believe it. He opened his bleary eyes and said, " Thanks for the advice."

" Any time, sweetheart. In fact, I'll walk you there, if you like", the girl said, suddenly shy. Draco nodded and the girl flushed. " I'm Katie, and that's my friend Becky."

" My name's Draco", he said.

" Sure it is", Katie said, and giggled. She hustled him off the train at their station, and waved goodbye to a grinning Becky. They walked down the stairs, snow starting to fall again, as the streetlights came on against the darkness of approaching night. They walked quickly because of the cold, and soon they stood on a corner where Katie had to head one way, and Draco the other.

" It's just a few buildings down there", Katie said, pointing. " I'm another two blocks that way. So if you ever wanted to, I don't know, go to the pub or something, I could give you my number."

" I'm not your type", Draco said, realizing he was passing up an opportunity to be cruel, but

finding himself too dispirited to think of anything else to say.

" Oh well, it was worth a shot anyway", Katie said. She waved and then headed off towards her home. Draco peered at the address one last time while under the glow of a streetlight, and then began walking, wondering idly what number of step he was on, and when was the last time he had felt his feet. He was so tired he thought these last few moments would kill him, but he was so close to his goal. The razor edge he was walking on was thinning into nothing, and soon he would find out if he were falling into the side of dark despair or to the side of loving oblivion.

It was a small block of flats that the address led him to. He walked through the first doorway, and found the next one locked. An elderly couple chose that moment to come out, and he made pretence of holding the door for them as he slipped through. He took the stairs to the third floor, and on wobbly knees he stood in front of Harry's door. His first knock was so weak that even he couldn't hear it. Steeling himself, he knocked a little harder and heard footsteps coming towards the door.

The door swung open, and standing in front of him, in a rugby shirt, jeans and slippers, was salvation in the guise of Harry Potter. Draco was sure he would have laughed at Harry's expression, if he hadn't felt so darn close to tears. He raised his red woolly hand and said, " Hello Harry", before tumbling into that oblivion.

So, obviously there's more and I'll post again soon, unless you want me to stop right away and never again attempt to write a Harry/Draco tale. Leave a review and let me know what you think I should do!

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Chapter: 2

Again, this is just a repost to space things out nicely (hopefully!) Thanks to everyone who reviewed part one, and said I should keep going. All of my chapters tend to be this long, but if you really want, I could shorten them... Up to you. And I've tried to take into consideration the advice given. Thanks again, enjoy!

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Harry caught Draco before the other could hit the ground, but not before there was a sizable lump from the wall embellishing Draco's pale forehead.

" Shit", Harry exclaimed. Not the most eloquent of phrases, but it was well suited to the situation. A neighbour came out of her flat, and looked up when she heard his voice. Harry blushed and tried to wave, which was considerably hard to do with an unconscious man in his arms. In the end, he merely slammed his door closed and promised to deal with the bewildered neighbour later.

He readjusted his awkward hold on Draco, and wondered if he had the strength to carry him into his bedroom. When he hefted Draco experimentally into his arms, he was surprised to discover he seemed to weigh nothing at all. With arms looped under Draco's body, Harry half-pulled, half-carried Draco to his bedroom. The final burst of energy needed to lift Draco onto the bed seemed to revive him somewhat, and Draco's cool grey eyes opened slightly.

" I made it", he said.

" In a manner of speaking", Harry said. " Rest now". Draco reached a clumsy hand up to the ties of his cloak, and then seemed to stare in incomprehension at his hand, still covered in wet wool. Harry pulled the mittens off and tossed them to the floor, and set to work on the cloak, pushing Draco's ineffectual hands away in the process.

" Always knew you wanted to see me naked", Draco slurred. He was finding it hard to concentrate, the room was spinning around, and he couldn't seem to find his arms to push Harry away with.

" Sure, that's what I'm doing", Harry said sarcastically. " You really are a mess, Malfoy."

The retort he was expecting never came as Draco slumped forward, not likely to awaken again anytime soon. If such a thing had happened to anyone else – a hated schoolyard rival arriving at their door, looking like a prisoner of war and passing out moments later – there probably would have been a lot of hair pulling panic. Harry, however, had seen more then most people, and he could handle it. At least he thought he could until he'd gotten Draco's cloak free, and seen the wasted, emancipated body of his one-time enemy. Without the wet cloak, and damp sweater, he realized the reason he'd been able to carry Draco was not (to his dismay) because he was so strong, but because Draco was so thin.

" Fuck", Harry said out loud. The breath wheezed out of Draco's throat, and rattled. His cheekbones were red with tiny dots of white in the centre indicating frostbite, and the tips of his rather pointed ears were equally afflicted. The only thing that felt warm on Draco was his forehead. Biting his lip to keep himself from uttering still more inappropriate swear words, Harry managed to pull off Draco's shoes from the swollen feet, and he removed the wet socks, quickly realizing Draco's feet were no better then his hands. The greyish T-shirt and horrid green slacks were still relatively dry, and hung loosely on Draco's spare frame. At that moment, Draco looked like a young Harry Potter, dressed in his cousin's hand-me-downs. Harry knew Draco would have some smart comment to make about that, and was almost sad that he wasn't awake to make one.

Satisfied that Draco was as comfortable as he could be made considering, he pushed Draco onto his back, pulled back the covers, and tucked the blonde in. He grabbed another couple of blankets and piled those on also, turned up the radiator, and left Draco to sleep. Just as he was closing the door, he thought he heard Draco rasp out a thank you. Harry sincerely hoped he had imagined that.

Harry carried Draco's black cloak into the living room and checked the pockets, producing a pen, almost a hundred pounds, a phone number on a scrap paper, a listing of 'Harry Potter' phone numbers, with several of the numbers crossed off, a metro map with his address attached, a ticket stub, and a small bag of galleons.

" Hmm, no wand", Harry muttered.

The list surprised him, obviously Draco had figured out where he lived the muggle-way, and he was amazed that Draco had come via the underground. Overall, Harry was impressed with how much Draco had accomplished, though he was worried that the boy had overdone it. How far had he come to get so cold? Was he the one Draco was looking for originally, or was he the last resort? What would Draco have done if he hadn't been home? The thought of Draco freezing to death while waiting desperately on his doorstep was rather disturbing. Then again, Harry rarely went out once he was home for the night. He rather preferred to keep to himself, which was part of the reason he was in muggle-London in the first place, so that he rarely met anyone who knew his past or even who he was. So of course, Malfoy had to walk in and disrupt his routine little life and remind him of all the things he was trying to forget. Once again, Harry had to ask himself, what was Draco Malfoy running from? And more importantly, what was he doing here?

Harry found himself thinking of a story he dimly remembered from his childhood. An old woman walking through the winter landscape to her cottage, found a snake near death and frozen on the ground. Though she knew that it was a dangerous animal, she knew she couldn't simply let it die. So although she was afraid, she picked it up, and took it home with her. She set it in a warm basket by the fire, and cared for it. When the snake awoke, it thanked her for her hospitality. The woman was glad to have someone to talk to, because she lived alone and it was always so quiet. The snake was weak, but seemed to like talking to her as well. She became more and more fond of the snake, as the snake gradually recovered. One day, she reached down to take him out of the basket to feed him, and the snake bit her. In shock, she dropped him, and the snake started sliding for the door. ' How could you bite me after all I've done for you?' the woman cried out, feeling betrayed. ' You should have remembered what I am. I bit you because I am a snake. It is my nature', said the snake, as he slithered away.

'Well, Draco is certainly a snake but I'm not about to be bitten. If I just accept that he is here for his own reasons, and never forget that one day he'll leave to go back to his real life, I should be just fine. It's not my job to care; I got myself out of that business a long time ago. I was never very good at it anyway', Harry muttered, angry for the first time that night. Knowing he could not possibly get any work done, stirred up as he was, Harry reached for the telly's remote, and switched on something brainless. He fell asleep on the couch, bathed in the glow from the television.

Harry awoke sticky and mildly disgusted with himself for falling asleep on the couch again, before remembering why he hadn't slept in his own bed. On the television some morning talk show was on, talking blandly about the importance of a good breakfast. Harry made a huge pot of strong coffee and a double chocolate pop-tart, and made a mock toast to the host on the program.

Of all the muggle things he liked, telly was definitely the best. Not because the shows were very good, or even particularly interesting, but because it was so uncomplicated. When his mind was in turmoil, television was like a sedative, and so it was almost always on, even when he wasn't in the room, for he liked the background noise of people talking. He was actually writing a paper on the affects of television for his media class at the University, but as it was Saturday, school was far from his mind. Actually, even if it had been a school day, he doubted his mind would have been on anything other then the blonde in his bed.

Harry grinned and took another sip from his coffee cup. He moved to stand in the doorway of his bedroom, looking at the slight lump under a mountain of blankets, wondering what his friends would say if they knew he had a blonde in his bed on a Saturday morning. A blonde male. A blonde male by the name of Draco Malfoy. Perhaps it was a good thing Ron and Hermione were in North America.

He slipped quietly up to the bed, putting his mug down on the bedside table next to his alarm clock, and pushed the blankets off Malfoy's head. The slack face was deathly pale, seemingly more so then it probably was due to feverishly red patches on his cheeks. The breathing still sounded faintly wet, but Draco wasn't coughing so he doubted the chest infection was too bad. He tried hard not to analyse his feelings too closely as he ran his fingers through the greasy blonde hair. One of Draco's hands reached up in his sleep to feebly bat the annoyance away.

" Still fighting me, hmm?" Harry whispered. He pulled the covers back up and returned to the kitchen. Most of the food he had was of the junk-food variety, as he had never really been much of a cook. There was always a better likelihood of coke being in his fridge then milk, and he frequently ran out of bread and eggs, but had a well-laid stock of chocolate on hand. At least he knew his priorities. Still, it might be a good idea if he headed for the shops while Draco slept, and bought some nutritional food for his patient. Besides, he was almost out of coffee, or as he termed it, his lifeblood.

Writing down a brief note in case Draco woke up, Harry grabbed his coat and keys and headed off to the metro. Standing in the fruit and vegetable section of the closest supermarket, Harry felt he was at a bit of a loss. In the end he bought the same things he usually did: potatoes, onions, apples and bananas. He swore to himself that next time he would be more inventive. He made the same oath every time, but he shrugged that off as unimportant.

Milk, eggs, bread, cheese, and many other so-called staples found their way into his basket, along with the more necessary items of coffee, biscuits, and chocolate sauce. Standing in the queue, waiting to pay, Harry read the tabloids on display, indulging in the fact that his photo did

not grace a single one of them. The cashier did not even look at him as she rang up his purchases; he was just one of the many anonymous customers to her.

Lugging the heavy bags to his flat, he fumbled for his keys, as he slid to the third floor in the lift. He was greeted by the noise of someone coughing harshly. He hefted the grocery bags onto the small kitchen table and headed for the bedroom. Draco was seated on the edge of the bed, his head held in his hands, as his body shook with deep-seated coughs. After a moment he wiped the back of his hand against his mouth and looked up.

" You're awake", Harry said.

" Toilet?"

" Through there", Harry said pointing. Draco nodded, and took a shaky breath before stumbling to his feet. He made it to the bathroom, while Harry went to put the groceries away. Draco nearly crawled back to the bed, pulling the warm blankets around him once again, thoroughly exhausted by his small trip. He was drifting off again, when Harry intruded.

" Here, drink this", Harry said. Draco stared at the tall glass of apple juice dubiously, not really thirsty until the liquid touched his tongue and he began swallowing in ever-greater gulps.

" Thanks", Draco muttered. Harry shrugged it off quickly.

" Whatever. Put this under your tongue and don't try to take it out or talk until I tell you to, okay?" Harry handed him a glass thermometer, and wondered if Draco was going to fight the orders he'd been given, and somewhat hoping he would. Draco took the thermometer without a murmur of protest, and placed it in his mouth as instructed.

" So now that I have you speechless for a few minutes, it's time I told you a few things." Draco scowled at being tricked and made to talk, but Harry hurried on. " Nothing bad, I swear. Just listen for once. Whatever painful thing you're going through, do not offer it to me as payment for your stay here. Truth is, I've come up with some of my own solutions for why you're here, and I'd prefer to go on believing in them for a while. Later, maybe we'll talk about this, but I don't want to hear it now, and you don't want to tell me, so leave it. Just know that you don't need to explain anything to me; I won't turn you out. Stay as long as you need, and leave whenever you feel ready, so long as you promise to never say that you owe me something. Got that? I owe you nothing, you owe me nothing."

Draco nodded, surprised at the sudden vehemence in Harry's voice. Harry took the thermometer from his mouth and tilted it back and forth, trying to read the temperature. It was high, but not dangerously so.

" You'll live, but Malfoy, you look like shit", Harry said.

Draco's eyes widened, a nasty retort on the tip of his tongue, when he saw the concern

unsuccessfully hidden in Harry's eyes. His voice came out unmistakably softer, " Yeah, but after a shower, I'll be fine. You'll still be the same".

" Well, that confirms it's you – nobody else would use the last of his energy thinking up insults", Harry said. The gibe however made him grin. So Draco had understand what he had been trying to say – that he didn't want to be treated any differently; he was sick to death of being hero-worshipped. Draco yawned widely and Harry spoke, " You need to get some sleep."

" And you still find it necessary to point out the obvious", Draco said. He then started coughing again, and groaned. " I don't suppose you know a good spell for what I've got, do you?"

" A fever, possible pneumonia, all from exposure and poor health. No, you got sick the regular way; you'll have to get better the regular way too. Sorry, though", Harry added, as Draco curled into a ball to avoid another coughing fit.

" It's okay. At least I'm warm. Is there any more of that juice?"

Harry nodded and refilled his glass. He also got him to swallow a couple of Tylenols, after convincing him he wasn't trying to poison him.

Draco gratefully sank down into the pillows, the adrenaline from their brief verbal repartee already spent. Soon the heady mixture of Harry's solid presence and the warmth of Harry's bed lulled Draco back into a deep sleep. Harry sat on the edge of the bed for a moment longer, wishing he didn't feel so protective of Draco, but consoled by the fact that Draco was probably the last person on earth who would need him anyway. Maybe his insulated little life could survive this intrusion after all.

Harry had to go to work that afternoon, so he left Draco sleeping soundly, while he walked to the little bookstore on the corner. The shop was owned and managed by a likeable couple in their thirties. Mrs. Cooper waved from the small office as Harry entered, and went back to her phone conversation. There were a couple of boxes waiting on the counter, filled with new books, and as there was nobody to serve, Harry began unpacking the books, and putting them in their places.

His mind was on Draco, however, and he smiled as he thought about the many stupid stunts and rivalries they had gone through together when they'd been students. Though painful at the time, the events had faded into uncomplicated impressions and images, devoid of any real emotion. Lord knows, there were far more unpleasant memories still residing in his head, and none of them were about Draco. The last few years at school had been the quietest between them. After Draco had broken things off with his father, he had withdrawn into his studies, into himself. Harry wasn't sure what had happened to him after the war with Voldemort.

" So, sweetie, how are things with Carlton?"

" Carlton?" Harry queried.

Mrs. Cooper rolled her eyes, " The guy who came in here every single day for months to stare at your… gorgeous eyes, and who finally got the nerve to ask you out? You did say yes, didn't you?"

" We went out for coffee, but that's it. I told you before I'm not looking to meet anyone", Harry said.

" Yes, but sometimes love just finds you", Mrs. Cooper said, clapping her hands together like a schoolgirl half her age.

Harry grinned, " What if I told you I had a blonde sleeping in my bed right at this moment?"

" I'd say I want to meet him", Mrs. Cooper responded automatically. " And if I was convinced he was good enough for you, then I'd tell you to go home early."

Harry just laughed, wondering what Draco would think if he knew he was fronting as his boyfriend, just so his romance-crazed boss would stop setting him up with every available bachelor in the area. They closed the shop up early anyway, at seven instead of eight, and Harry whistled a merry little tune as he walked back to his home. If he didn't know any better, he'd think he was happy having company.

Draco was still sleeping when Harry came in, though he frowned slightly when Harry touched his forehead to check for fever. Harry couldn't be sure but it seemed like it was going down. Probably by tomorrow, Draco would be up for some solid food. Providing, of course, Harry didn't burn it. Tomorrow was Sunday, and he didn't have to work, although he had an exam coming that he ought to be studying for. Pulling out his philosophy textbook, he set to work, strangely motivated to have as much free time as possible tomorrow.

Draco awoke feeling suffocated by the blankets and the darkness that pervaded the small bedroom. It was the smell on the sheets that reminded Draco where he was, and he let himself relax. How many days had it been since he'd left the place he'd once called home? A place that had become a prison long before he'd ever been locked inside it.

It had occurred to him at some point, as he'd drifted between dreams and wakefulness, that his mother was probably dead. She must have known Lucius would have her killed if he discovered her involvement, and Draco doubted she would ever do something so undignified as to let herself be murdered. Maybe she had planned on killing herself before that happened. Maybe letting him escape had been her act of absolution. He took another deep breath and hauled himself out of bed. He paused slightly, letting his head stop spinning, before getting to his feet. He used the washroom, wishing he had a toothbrush, and went to find Harry. He knew that the raven-haired man was home; he always felt safer when the flat was occupied.

Silently Draco walked forward, coming into a lighted living room where a square black box was showing moving pictures complete with sound. Harry was sprawled on his stomach on the

couch, flipping through a book. When he saw Draco, Harry hit a button, and the box turned off. The room became even quieter, and Draco looked around him nervously. The walls were the colour of warm sand, the furniture, deep burgundy and gleaming oak. A bookshelf filled one entire wall, the couch sat across from the black box, and there were a few other things Draco didn't recognize strewn about. It was small, comfortably clean, and warm. Draco closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the serenity. He could see himself belonging here.

" Would it be alright if I had a bath or something?" Draco asked.

" I'd prefer it, actually, because truthfully you smell", Harry said. Draco scowled and Harry chuckled as he went and started the bath water running. He returned to his room, found some clothes for Draco, and added a couple of towels to the pile. " Should be ready in a moment. I left the light on – the switch on the wall turns it off and on."

Draco nodded, and grabbed the items out of Harry's arms. The water in the bath was achingly hot and Draco bit back a scream as his ravaged skin touched the surface. The warm, moist air weighed on his lungs and he started coughing again. When the fit was over, he lay back in the water and tried to catch his breath. He felt so weak, and hated that feeling above all others. People always took advantage of weakness; it was a matter of natural instinct. It meant he had to be on the offensive with Harry to keep them both safe.

It would be so easy, too easy; to let himself crumble and have Harry pick up the pieces. The problem being, Harry would put him back together wrong; he'd be a kinder, gentler, weaker, Draco, one that could never survive on his own. But he was still so tired… And hungry he realized, his practical side taking over.

Crawling out of the bathtub, he pulled on boxers, grey sweatpants, a clean orange T-shirt, and a dark blue fuzzy pullover, several sizes too large. His feet were stuffed into thick woollen socks, bright green in colour and obviously homemade. Mrs. Weasley's handiwork if he wasn't very much mistaken. A glance in the mirror showed that the colours clashed as badly as he had suspected they would. 'When would Harry ever learn?' he thought, breaking into a small grin. Wandering out into the main room again, he found Harry in the small kitchen still reading the textbook, only now Draco could make out the title: 'Introduction to Anthropology'. Weird.

" Hungry?" Harry asked, barely looking up. Actually, Harry was trying very hard not to think about how adorably vulnerable Draco looked dressed in his clothes.

" Yeah, starving."

" Looks like you haven't eaten in months", Harry said without meaning to. His mind was still stuck on the 'adorable' Draco tangent.

" Try years", Draco muttered unthinkingly.

" What?"

" Forget it. Not now, remember?" Draco reminded, alluding to their one serious conversation.

" Right. Okay, so I have real food and good food. What do you feel up to eating?"

" Anything", Draco said. Harry opened the refrigerator door, and Draco saw the sorts of things Harry apparently ate regularly, and gulped nervously. " Well maybe not quite anything…"

Harry sniggered. " Don't worry, I'll start you off slow. Most of the food is the same and besides, muggle food is more boring. Nothing's charmed into moving". Harry handed him a glass of juice, grape this time, which Draco downed in a matter of seconds. He poured him another one and left the pitcher within his reach. Harry turned to the frying pan and tossed some eggs into it, minus the shells Draco noted, and decided to scramble them when he broke the yolks by accident. They ate scrambled eggs on thick slices of buttery toast, covered in tomato sauce (well, Harry's were anyway), and washed down with juice. Draco went on to consume two bowls of porridge, three more pieces of toast covered in strawberry jelly, a banana, and the rest of the grape juice.

" Coffee?" Harry tentatively suggested, as he watched Draco lick his fingers clean with obvious relish.

" Love some", Draco said. Harry wrinkled his nose when Draco dumped in three heaping teaspoons of sugar into his coffee. Cream was understandable, but that much sugar?

" Sacrilege", Harry muttered with a smile.

" Pansy used to say it was proof that I was already bitter enough", Draco said.

" You mean she said something almost witty?" Harry asked in exaggerated disbelief.

" I know, I almost choked at the time", Draco said, a rare smile on his face. He stirred his coffee thoughtfully as the conversation stilled.

" So what were you planning on doing today?"

" I have exams over the next couple of weeks. Then I'm off for a while, until the third term starts in February. So I should be studying, but since Hermione's not here to nag me… I'll probably end up watching telly."

" So you're in school? Where? And what's Granger up to these days? And what's telly?" Draco asked.

" Hmm, yeah I've gone back to school, muggle-version this time, and Hermione's with Ron, in the states I think now, touring the schools they've got there. She's got scholarships to just about every post-secondary school of magic there is. But most importantly is that television is… well

hard to explain. Come on, we can watch in the living room, and you can lie down on the sofa. You look about ready to fall asleep again."

" Always a danger when you start talking Potter", Draco said, one side of his mouth quirked up.

" Do you want to find out what telly is like or not?" Harry asked with mock severity.

" I'll be good", Draco chirped.

" I don't expect miracles", Harry said. They moved into the living room, and Harry grabbed a quilt from his bed and tucked it around Draco, which prompted another bout of teasing, as they both tried to disrupt the otherwise peaceful scene into something familiar that they could handle.

Draco liked television. No, wait, Draco LOVED television. While he recovered from his illness, he had many occasions to familiarize himself with the use of the black box. There was always something on that he would watch. Game shows were great, especially when someone lost big time. Talk shows were almost better then the gossip that used to mill around Hogwart's. The daily soaps were becoming addictive: the evil villains in the one-dimensional plotlines were just so deliciously… well, evil. As if anybody could be so easily classified as either good or bad. He loved the evening dramas, the cartoons, the sitcoms, and even the news. In a week, he had discovered more about the social lives of muggles, then he had previously gathered in his entire life.

Harry had given him a crash course in all things electrical, so that he could work most of the machines in the flat. Electricity, Draco had decided, was like magic. Muggles used machines to control electricity and to get it to do what they wanted; wizards used wands and spells to get magic to do what they wanted. The analogy was imperfect, but it suited Draco's purposes. He had already driven Harry crazy asking how the light switches actually worked.

" I don't know, exactly. You just hit them, electricity flows, and… What does it matter?"

" But don't you like to know what's behind something?" Draco had asked.

" Oh, you're one of those people", Harry said, his nose wrinkling slightly in distaste. " I should have remembered how you drove Snape up the wall, always asking about a potion's ingredients. Not what they did, but why they did that."

" Yeah, and his answer was always 'because they just do!'", Draco added, his voice mimicking Snape's so well that it was downright scary. They had both sniggered then.

Despite the fascination with television and with the flat's innovations, however, Draco was becoming more and more restless as his strength returned. Part of him wanted to get out and do something, and yet the larger and more resistant part, refused to step beyond the parameters of Harry's flat. He was safe here: safe from his father, safe from the corruption of power, and safe from the outside world that seemed bent on punishing him for the wrongs he had done to it. The

only thing he had to face within those four walls was himself, though even that was becoming more difficult. He found that he was constantly thinking, wondering where his life was leading, wondering why he seemed so content to let things sort themselves out, when usually he liked to take control.

Sometimes he felt hollow, like someone had come along, and torn out all his feelings and emotions, and replaced them with nothing but muted terror, and grey numbness. Sometimes he knew there was indeed something inside him that was struggling to get out, and the frustrating part was that he had no way of knowing what. He spent many of his days sleeping, claiming it was recovery, when really it was a way of hiding from himself. When he was awake, he distracted himself with as many things as he could, but inevitably would think of his two-year seclusion, about his escape from Malfoy manor, and about the things he wished more then anything to forget. More then anything, he wanted to forget that he was alone.

Draco was lying on the couch, feet propped up on one armrest, his head twisted towards the TV screen. He was dressed in a faded pair of blue jeans, tightly belted, but fitting better then they had when Draco had first stolen… borrowed them from Harry, and a pale blue, long sleeved shirt, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. He clicked through the channels and wondered what would make the next six or seven hours go by, when his attention was captured by something he had not seen before. It was a cooking show.

The man preparing the food had a disturbingly wicked sense of humour, one that reminded Draco surprisingly of Snape, and was making food in such a blur of movement that it was obvious, even to Draco, that the man knew his stuff. Not to mention the results made him want to drool. To think what had started off as rather ordinary, and even slightly disgusting, ingredients, had been turned into such mouth-watering delights… All with a little patience, strict adherence to a recipe, and some careful measuring. It was almost exactly like potion making, which explained why when Harry cooked the results were a little… off.

Draco sniggered to himself, as he recalled some of Harry's less-then-stellar moments in the kitchen. Burnt eggs, burnt toast, burnt spaghetti, burnt porridge, and even burnt oven-mitts (Harry having accidentally put the latter items in the oven along with a casserole dish). It wasn't that Harry was so bad at cooking, it's just that he was clearly so apathetic about the whole process. Harry obviously had the same problem with cooking that he had with potion making; he didn't appreciate the intricacies of such a subtle art.

Draco flipped the channels, this time driven by purpose. He found another cooking show, and grabbed a notebook and a pen. Pens were also some of his new favourite things. The chef rattled off a list of ingredients, most of which he had never heard of, but Draco hadn't been the top student in his potions class for nothing. Snape used to reel off entire lists of things at the top of his voice, and expect them to recall all that he had said, and Draco was one of the few people who had never failed at the task. This was a cake-walk; both literally and figuratively. Draco took meticulous notes and listened with rapt attention. He felt a little lost at first, but gradually he learned the measurements, what they meant by greasing a pan, or folding eggs into a mixture.

Draco watched all morning, and most of the afternoon. Glancing at the clock on the wall, he knew he still had plenty of time until Harry was due home. He had explained he had a final, and he wouldn't be back until quite late.

Draco turned the volume up on the television as he found he liked the background noise, and searched Harry's bookshelves for a recipe book he had noticed earlier. Draco knew from past potion making, that it was best to start with small projects, and work your way up, and that even then, the first attempt was likely to be a disaster. The jacket of the book he found was covered in dust as though it had never been opened.

" And here I've been eating Harry's cooking all week, naively thinking that he knew what he was doing. Draco, you're getting soft, giving Harry the benefit of the doubt like that", Draco muttered. He caught himself talking out loud and grimaced. He was NOT going to become one of those people. " No way", he said, out loud again. He slapped his forehead, and decided to get on with the recipe before he went permanently insane. If it was not too late already.

'Scones' was the recipe of choice for Draco's first foray into the wonderful world of cooking. Simple, tasty, and much better when not store bought. Plus, they were one of the few things that could be made with the rather limited ingredients in the kitchen. Draco got the scones right on the first try, pulling them out of the oven when they were turning just slightly golden-brown on the top. He felt the same smugness he used to feel when he'd gotten a potion done correctly. It had been awhile since he'd felt smug about anything, and he realized he'd missed it. It was good to feel a smirk on his face, and he could hardly wait until Harry got home, so he could rub it in that he was good at something that Harry wasn't. He'd probably give him a smirk too, just to see if Harry would still respond with that endearing pout.

" Hey, Malfoy, you here?" Harry called out, as he walked into his home, late that night. He and a few of his classmates had gone out for a drink after the exam, so he was half expecting Draco to be asleep, but the lights were on, and he found Draco curled up in an armchair in the main room, reading a mystery book from off the shelves. Draco calmly book-marked his page, and put the novel down, before deigning to respond to Harry's query.

" Why do you always ask if I'm here? You know I am. A better question would be if I was awake or if I was willing to talk to you", Draco said, trying to be snide, but his amusement was apparent, even to Harry.

" Maybe it's just wishful thinking on my part. I keep asking, hoping to be greeted with silence", Harry said, rolling his eyes. " Did you get something to eat? Sorry, I was gone all day. God, I'm starving."

Harry kept talking as he made his way to the kitchen. He switched on the light and gaped. For one thing, his kitchen was clean. His kitchen was never clean. Far more importantly however, was the unmistakable smell of fresh scones.

" Hope you don't mind, I did a little baking today", Draco said. Harry whirled around, staring at Draco as he leaned casually against the doorjamb. " Tomorrow I thought I'd try something a little more difficult. Ham omelette sound good to you? There's not much else in the ice-box."

Draco was thoroughly enjoying the fact that Harry had suddenly developed drop-jaw disease.

" Well, I… Can I have one?" Harry asked.

" Of course you can idiot. I made them for both of us. You did pay for the food, after-all." Harry reached for one of the floury biscuits and took a tentative bite. Harry had never had the sort-of life where homemade food was common, so he cut himself some slack when he crammed the rest of the scone into his mouth, manners be damned. He reached for another one, mumbling something along the lines of 'good' to Draco, when he felt the plate being moved out of his reach.

" Show a little restraint, would you Potter? You're getting crumbs all over my counter", Draco said. Harry would have laughed at the bossy attitude, if he hadn't been so intent upon swallowing. " Put the telly on, why don't you?"

Harry nodded, mouth still full, and headed for the living room. He flipped on the television, and turned on the Simpson's, a show both he and Draco liked. Draco soon reappeared with two mugs of instant hot chocolate, and the plate of scones, now heated and topped with butter. He set them down on the shaky coffee-table and refused to comment on the thoughtfulness of the gesture, as though he was always doing nice things like that.

" Oh, hang-on. I got something for you today. Where did I put my stuff?" Harry muttered, looking around until he found his black book-bag.

" You got me something?" Draco asked, his voice carefully neutral to hide the curiosity he was feeling.

" Yeah, well it's not much", Harry said, suddenly unsure. He pulled out a very thick, very heavy, very beat-up chemistry book, and handed it to Draco. " You remember? You kept asking me about how batteries worked and other stuff? Well, I probably just confused you more, so I thought you might like the official definitions."

Harry looked hopefully at Draco and it was painfully evident that he was hoping for some appreciation. Surprisingly, Draco was inclined to give it.

" I didn't think you were listening", Draco said, flipping open the book, and reading the first thing that he saw. It was something about atoms, and Draco didn't have the foggiest notion what that meant, but it didn't matter. Now he had the tools to learn, he didn't feel so adrift.

" Pretty dry reading if you ask me. Reminds me of potions', Harry said, giving a mock shudder of disgust. Draco snorted.

" If you find it boring, then I like the subject more already. Strange, but I was thinking of potions already today. How cooking is not that much different from what we used to do in class."

" Hey, anytime you want to cook, that's fine by me", Harry said. He was on his fourth scone, and was wondering if Draco would notice if he grabbed just one more…

" Thanks for the book, Harry", Draco said. It was such a straightforward thank you that Harry almost missed it.

" Thanks for the food", Harry said, reaching for a fifth scone while Draco's attention was absorbed by the book. " And I'm especially glad you didn't give in to tradition and put raisins or currants in them. I hate raisins."

" I know", Draco said. He was still flipping through the pages of the chemistry book, so it took him a moment to realize that Harry was staring at him. Caught off guard by the intensity of the stare, he snapped, " What?"

" How do you know I don't like raisins?"

" Oh, gee, maybe because I've been living with you for awhile now, and have seen you pick apart many a baked good, just to be rid of the raisins? I wouldn't be much of a friend if I didn't notice even that much."

" Friend? Did you just call me a friend, Malfoy?" There was a goofy expression on Harry's face that Draco didn't like one bit.

" Slip of the tongue", Draco said scowling.

" I don't think it was. I think you meant it."

" Don't be ridiculous, Potter", said Draco. He began putting more space between himself and Harry on the couch. The gleam in Harry's eyes could only mean trouble.

" You like me. I'm your friend. Who would have guessed it, Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy friends?"

" Well, maybe I'm your friend, but as for liking you? That's definitely pushing it", Draco said, a small smile on his features.

" Oh, deny it all you want, Draco, but I know the truth! You, the greatest Slytherin that ever was, is friends with", Harry dropped his voice into a stage-whisper, " Harry Potter."

Harry started laughing, and he leapt off the couch. Draco tried very hard to keep his face

looking dour and unaffected, but damn it if Harry wasn't being completely foolish. It was impossible not to laugh at him. And what was more, he felt like laughing. He laughed as Harry made an elaborate bow before him, laughed as Harry fluttered his eyes like a girl and pretended to swoon at the mere sight of him, and laughed when Harry was doing nothing at all except laughing with him. When oxygen became an issue and the laughing subsided, Draco said,

" You're rather pathetic, aren't you Potter?"

" Yeah, but I've got pretty, popular friends who keep the bigger lads from beating me up too much", Harry said, grinning.

" Well at least you admit I'm popular. And pretty", Draco said, teasingly. " There's hope for this friendship yet if you keep up this level of adoration."

" Get back in the kitchen and I'll consider it", Harry said. For some reason, this got them laughing again.

That night, for the first time in two years, Draco had good dreams instead of nightmares. It was because he no longer felt quite so alone. In the other room, still relegated to the couch, Harry fell asleep still grinning, because he felt exactly the same way.

Arg! I went sweet again. Damn. Please review anyway?

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Chapter: 3

Hello all you fabulous readers! Term starts tomorrow, so I thought I'd get this out before I get busy, irritated, and depressed. Thank you so much for the kind encouragement, and not to mention the very useful advice. Keep it up! The more reviews, the faster I get inspired (funny how that works), and the story is finally going to start picking up the pace. Enjoy!

That night, for the first time in two years, Draco had good dreams instead of nightmares. It was because he no longer felt quite so alone. In the other room, still relegated to the couch, Harry fell asleep still grinning, because he felt exactly the same way.

The next few days passed by slowly and quietly. Harry spent quite a bit of his time at his university, studying, giving Draco free run of the flat. Draco continued to heal and continued to cook. 'Occupational therapy,' Harry had joked, which Draco had laughed at, though he really hadn't understood. Later, Draco had looked up the term, and had uncovered what it meant. He didn't think Harry was too far off the mark. It was nice to be good at something again, and good to be needed.

Harry yawned widely as he came into the kitchen. He was still half asleep, despite having just had his morning shower, and could barely manage to nod at Draco by way of greeting.

" You clash, go change", Draco said sternly. Indeed, the improperly buttoned up blue shirt and green slacks Harry was wearing did not match well, but to Draco's consternation, his first reaction had been one of appreciation, not disdain. The way Harry's black hair curled slightly from the moisture of his shower, the glitter of tiny drops of water that dripped off a few wayward strands, even the fact that Harry was barefoot and without his customary glasses; it was all seemingly screaming at him, demanding attention and recognition. So instead, Draco focused his attention on the first available flaw he could find, and dropped his eyes back to the tabletop.

Harry's response was little more then a grunt. He went directly to the coffee pot, and stood motionlessly, staring at the machine until the black brew was ready. It wasn't until he had downed half a cup of caffeine that he felt capable of speech.

" I always figured you for an annoying morning person," Harry said, pulling out the chair across from Draco, and slumping into it.

" There's half a cheese omelette on the stove," Draco said, gesturing with his cup of tea without looking up from his chemistry book.

Harry could tell Draco was avoiding looking in his eyes, and he wondered why. " You didn't spit in it, did you?"

Draco snorted contemptuously. " I would never do something so vulgar."

Harry was not reassured by the comment, since Draco's tone seemed to infer that there was still *something* wrong with the omelette. He poked it gingerly with a fork and his stomach growled. With a shrug, he figured the risk was worth it, and ate the rest of the omelette right out of the pan. Satisfied, he dumped the pan in the sink, poured himself another cup of coffee, and leaned back in his chair.

" That was delicious," Harry said.

" How you've survived thus far on your own…" Draco did the impossible, and looked up at Harry. Thankfully, the disturbing feelings from before had faded, and Harry was just his friend again. Draco grinned, "I was thinking of trying to cook something a bit more challenging. You'll need to pick up a few things though. Actually, we're nearly out of everything."

" Yeah, I noticed. Well, I don't have anything planned for today, other then picking up my paycheque. We could go out, get a few errands done. You must be getting sick of this place," Harry suggested. " We can go to the supermarket, and you can get whatever ingredients you want."

Draco's first impulse was to say yes, but then the fear crept in, as though ice had been poured into his blood. Actually leave the flat? But he was safe here; he was protected. With every day he spent indoors, the world outside seemed to become darker, and more dangerous. What if someone outside recognized him? What if he somehow got lost, and couldn't find his way back? But he supposed Harry would be with the whole time, and Harry did make him feel safe. And he did want to see what was out beyond the four walls of the flat, to see a little more of Harry's world.

As Draco's mind whirled, still more complications arose. If he admitted to being recovered enough to go outside, then it would mean he would have to come up with another excuse for staying with Harry. For while he could consider leaving the flat for a few hours, the thought of leaving permanently made him nauseous. The outside world was only bearable because he had somewhere to come back to. A home. The problem was, it wasn't his home, but Harry's, and no matter what Harry said, eventually they would have to talk about why Draco was here. Eventually, Draco would have to leave - only he didn't want it to be so soon.

He needed a plan. Draco had always been good at organizing and planning things, and this was no different. If he wanted to stay with Harry (and right now, he was not going to complicate the problem by wondering why he did want to stay), then he needed some time to think. With a sinking heart, he knew the only answer he could give Harry's suggestion was no. He wanted to go, but the risk was too great. He couldn't leave, until he could be sure he could always come back.

" I don't think that's a good idea," Draco responded finally. He saw the almost imperceptible dulling of Harry's expression, and felt even worse. Harry had taken him in, and this was how he treated him? He hastened to give an excuse, " Not that I don't want to be seen with you, but I still don't think I'm feeling well enough."

" Do you still have a fever?" Harry asked. He reached out and gently touched Draco's forehead. Draco jerked backwards in his chair, away from the touch. The heat that caused his face to flush had nothing to do with fever, however, and everything to do with a sudden awareness of what his new found feelings towards Harry probably meant. Such feelings would… complicate matters.

Harry felt hurt when his touch was so quickly rebuffed. Well, at least he knew where he stood now. Despite having prepared himself for the inevitable snakebite, he was dismayed to discover that he had still been hurt by it. As it was, though intellectually he knew it wasn't anyone's problem but his, he couldn't help but lash out slightly, in anger. He said, " Oh, I see how it is."

Draco had always been good at reading people, and although Harry was attempting to conceal his emotions, Draco could see that Harry's jaw was clenched tightly, meaning despite everything, he had succeeded in making Harry mad at him. Sighing deeply, knowing he would definitely regret his actions in a moment, Draco spoke,

" Then again, maybe the fresh air would do me good."

Harry brightened, an easy grin appearing as if by magic. Any comments were forgiven and forgotten in an instant, like Harry was a dog Draco had kicked, and then conversely patted on the head.

" We'll take it easy, I swear. We'll get my cheque, and then go to the supermarket. Three hours, tops."

" Fine," Draco said reluctantly, determined to show as little enthusiasm as possible, which was quite easy considering he was still scared stiff at the thought of actually going out. " But for fuck sake, brush your hair, and change your clothes."

" Like you're one to talk", Harry said cheerfully. He looked pointedly at Draco's borrowed clothes, which were still a little loose, and would probably always be a little too large on Draco's slighter frame.

" I don't have a choice. You, however, willingly walk around dressed like an idiot," Draco explained.

" With flattery like this, I'm going to get a swelled head", Harry said, rolling his eyes skyward. He did go and change though.

Draco was bundled into one of Harry's heavier overcoats, and he put on the red mittens he had worn on arrival. The mittens were definitely not his style, but they reminded him of trials already accomplished, and he needed all the confidence he could get. Harry was oblivious to Draco's trepidation as they stepped over the threshold, and locked the flat door behind them.

They stood in the narrow hallway in front of a set of dented metal doors. Harry pushed a button, and there was a faint rattling before the doors slid open, and Harry stepped into the lift. He watched with considerable amusement as Draco edged his way inside as though fearing the doors would close on him like a steel trap.

" Never been in a lift before?" Harry asked, as the lift gave a little lurch and began its descent to the ground floor. Draco shook his head no, as he examined the sensations of the moving box. The elevator stopped, and Draco's stomach did a little flip as the forces of gravity and momentum collided. " How did you get to my place before?"

" Took the stairs," Draco replied.

" I keep forgetting how much of this is new to you. It's like when I first went to Hogwart's. Everything was different, and some people just took it for granted."

" You always looked so completely ridiculous every time something remotely magical happened," Draco said, slowly relaxing as they walked. The sky above had not fallen when they

walked out the front doors to the sidewalk, and he took that as a good sign.

" And, oh, how the tables have turned," Harry said, cackling evilly, and rubbing his palms together with malicious glee. " Be afraid, Draco, be very afraid."

" I already am afraid. Afraid people will think I'm accompanying you by choice," Draco muttered, and Harry just laughed.

They soon came to the little bookstore where Harry worked. It was painted a pretty shade of blue with white shutters, and a hand painted sign flapped slowly in the wind with the store's name, 'Book's End', written on it. Tiny silvery bells rang as Harry entered, and , behind the counter, looked up briefly and smiled. Her eyes widened to an impossible size when she saw Draco standing next to Harry. She looked back and forth between them, and Harry blushed a deep red. He had been hoping she would have forgotten his comment from before.

The store was bustling, and there was a small crowd at the register. Mrs. Cooper had to turn away and address a customer, and Harry gave a brief sigh of relief. Mrs. Cooper looked to be working hard and loving every minute of it – chances were good that she wouldn't get a chance to ask any questions.

" Be with you in a minute, Harry, I still have to work out your money, you don't mind waiting a bit?" Mrs. Cooper called out.

" Take your time", Harry replied. Draco was already peering at the books; his interest piqued by more then a few titles in the non-fiction section. He had progressed from the natural science books, to the cookbooks, when Mrs. Cooper attached herself to his arm.

" And here I thought Harry was pulling my leg about having a boyfriend staying with him. How has he managed to keep you a secret, darling? You are positively gorgeous. Come. Come and talk with me, while I figure out Harry's cheque", Mrs. Cooper said, all in one breath.

She didn't give Draco a chance to respond as she pulled him into her small office. Draco caught a fleeting glimpse of Harry manning the till and looking stricken that Draco was alone with his boss, and then he was sitting in a careworn chair, across from a beaming Mrs. Cooper. " Isn't Harry just a dear? Helping me out like this, even when it's not his day to work, and when he obviously has much better things to do with his time. Don't worry; I'll give him back soon, though. I'll make sure you and he have some quality time together if I have to force him from the shop myself."

" Harry's told you about me?" Draco asked slowly; his mind busy sorting the pieces of the puzzle together. So he was Harry's boyfriend, was he? He supposed he could either deny it, or play along. As always, the opportunity for being deceptive appealed to him. It would mean dredging up skills he had not used for a long time - flexing rusty mental abilities. It would be a good way of testing just how far his recovery had progressed; a Draco Malfoy that couldn't lie and scheme, was a defective Draco Malfoy.

" Barely at all! He just mentioned a blonde in his bed, and here I thought it was some trick so I would stop setting him up with people! I'm ever so glad I was mistaken, what's your name then, love? And how and when did you meet our Harry?"

" I'm Draco, and you are?" Draco asked politely, already sliding comfortably into the role of Harry's lover. It was a little disconcerting just how easy the position came to him, but he shrugged it off, wanting to focus on the game at hand.

" I'm Mrs. Cooper, but never mind that. I want to hear all about you and Harry. I'll just die if you say it was love at first sight," she said with a squeal.

" Well, we met at school, and the reaction was immediate," Draco said. The hallmark of lying was to keep as many things true as was possible, and omit rather then change the things that were false. Aiming for the most angelic face he could muster, he said melodramatically, " Boarding school can be so lonely, you know."

" Oh, the both of you so lost and alone, away at boarding school, and then finding each other! How sweet. I can picture it already. Study dates in the library, holding hands in the hallways, stolen kisses after curfew in some forgotten classroom… Ooh, it's so romantic! And now you've come to see him, he must be so happy. I don't think I've ever seen him so at ease with someone else."

" We've never run out of things to say to each other," Draco admitted. That was also true – insults had always flown fast and furious between them.

" I knew the moment I saw you that you were the one for my Harry. Such a charming boy, you are," Mrs. Cooper said. Draco actually found himself blushing; she was just so sincere. " And here I was, trying to set him up with one of the local blokes. I was getting very worried about him, you see, he never seemed to show any interest in anyone, but now I see he was saving himself for you!"

Draco nearly spoiled things by laughing. The thought of Harry 'saving himself' for Draco, was beyond funny. Fortunately, Mrs. Cooper was giggling also. Draco was starting to feel like they were old friends.

" So are you two living together?"

Draco leaned forward, dropping his voice conspiratorially, and Mrs. Cooper leaned across the desk, eager to hear the secret. " Well, I've been hoping Harry will make it official, and ask me to move in permanently. A long distance relationship is just too wearing, you know?"

" Oh, I know dear, I know", Mrs. Cooper said, all sympathy for Draco's plight.

" But you know Harry. So stuck in his ways that any mention of change and he just pulls right

back into himself. I really don't know what to do," Draco said. He really should have gotten some sort-of award for his performance; his lower lip was trembling slightly, and there were tears shining in his eyes. That they were tears of restrained laughter was beside the point.

" The beast! I tell you it's the same with men everywhere, present company excluded of course", Mrs. Cooper said, winking at him. " Well, you just keep at him, and even Harry will come around. He can be a little obstinate at times, but that doesn't mean he doesn't care. I'll push him from this side, as well. I would so like to seem him happily settled with a nice man like you."

" That would be just wonderful, Mrs. Cooper. I'm sure that with you reminding him from time to time about me, we will definitely get a reaction from him," Draco said. He could already see Harry's face as he tried to defend himself from Mrs. Cooper's well-intentioned prodding.

" If all else fails, you can always just flutter those beautiful eyelashes of yours, and I bet he just melts at your feet. He already can't keep his eyes off of you", Mrs. Cooper whispered encouragingly to Draco. They both looked out the door and Harry was indeed staring at the pair of them. He couldn't help it, what we're they talking about?

Harry finished up with the last customer, and in the lull, hurried to the office. Draco and Mrs. Cooper we're still giggling and talking in whispers, which suspiciously stopped when he entered the room.

" And there's our darling boy. Here's your cheque, Harry. I hope you don't mind I stole your boyfriend for a bit? I had to make sure he was good enough for you, you understand."

Harry darted his eyes to Draco, wondering what the other had said. Draco watched him squirm for a moment, before jumping in,

" And it's a good thing she did. I found out that you've barely mentioned me. It's almost as though you're ashamed of me," Draco said, affecting a pout.

Harry blushed a deep red, and began to stutter,

" I… uh."

" Shame on you Harry, taking Draco here for granted. I bet you haven't even taken him out on the town since he's been here, have you? Selfishly keeping him to yourself," Mrs. Cooper scolded.

" Well, I…"

" This is the first time we've been out together in public in ages", Draco supplied helpfully.

" Harry!"

" But I…"

" No excuses! Now you take that paycheque of yours, and you cash it, and then you take Draco out somewhere very nice, just the two of you. And Draco, darling, you come back soon and tell me all the details," Mrs. Cooper said.

" Oh Harry, what a perfectly wonderful idea," Draco said, pulling on his coat and mittens, before reaching for Harry's hand. Harry dropped the hand in surprise, Mrs. Cooper frowned, Harry sighed, and took Draco by the hand again. Draco bit his lip hard to stop the laughter bubbling in his throat.

" Now, off with you two. Be good," Mrs. Cooper said, shooing them out of the store. A completely bewildered Harry allowed himself to be dragged out the door and around the corner. When they were a safe distance away, Draco let loose the laughter he had been holding.

Harry crossed his arms across his chest, looking indignant; Draco was bent nearly double, howling with laughter.

" Your face… It was priceless! I thought she was going to burn you on the spot when you didn't hold my hand," Draco gasped out, a fresh peal of laughter making more speech impossible. Harry tried desperately not to smile, but laughter truly is contagious, and even though the joke was at his expense, he found himself cracking. His laughter, fortunately, was drowned out by Draco's. Eventually, Draco ran out of air, and had to sit on the street's curb to catch his breath.

" At least you're taking the whole fact that I'm queer quite well," Harry said quietly, helping Draco to his feet.

" Hmm, I don't know why, but I didn't find it that surprising. I've never really cared one way or the other, anyway, about anyone," Draco said, still a little winded, but sufficiently in control again. " Though, having your boss tell me that I was your boyfriend was a surprise. You'd think I'd remember something like that."

Harry had the grace to blush, " Sorry about that. I was just trying to stop her from her matchmaking, and I had to give her something. You saw how happy she was."

" Don't worry, I could have done worse, and I like her. She thinks I'm about the greatest man she's ever met, which shows her excellent taste."

" You know, for a straight man, you did a very good impression of being gay."

Draco went quiet, and picked up the pace. He tossed out his words over his shoulder, " Whoever said I was straight?"

Harry stopped walking mid-step, his foot dangling a few centimetres above the sidewalk,

allowing Draco to move on ahead. Draco passed the steps that would have taken them to the underground, but Harry didn't tell him. It was a longish walk to the supermarket, but then, the conversation had just gotten interesting.

" You're gay? But your reputation…" Harry blushed, remembering some of the more provocative gossip that had circulated around Draco's exploits. Draco snorted,

" The Slytherin slut? Banged every one in Hogwart's twice? Two for one special on virgin-be-gone? That reputation?"

" That would be the one."

" I never dated a single person while at Hogwart's – not even Pansy can claim to have gone on one official date with me."

To say that Harry was shocked was an understatement, " Then how…?"

" Because I was frequently absent, and because I never showed the remotest interest in those around me, it was assumed that I must be getting it somewhere else, from people far more experienced and pleasurable. Thus the legend was born. I think they would have been sorely disappointed if they'd known I was more often then not sitting on the castle roof reading."

" Maybe I should have tried disappearing more regularly. I might have improved my reputation," Harry said lightly.

" Stupid, isn't it? The things we do to impress people? When I caught onto the fact that my housemates thought I was having passionate, clandestine meetings, I began staging elaborate scenes to reinforce their suspicions. I'd do-up my buttons wrong, leave my robes rumbled, even rub lipstick on my collar. Pathetic, really. I stopped doing that when I got a bit older; it didn't seem so important anymore. Though I would still never admit that I was a virgin. It's a fate worse then death to be a virgin these days, though why that's the case when there's so many diseases, I'll never understand."

" I know what you mean. I'm… I'm still a virgin, even now. I've made out a few times, and stuff, but… I try not to let it show, if that's even possible. It's sick really, how my deepest, darkest, secret is that I'm a virgin. Not the deaths I've caused, not the fact that I'm a wizard or anything. What I don't want people to discover is that I've never slept with anyone."

" And yet you told me", Draco pointed out.

" Yeah, well…"

" Sometimes secrets need to be told," Draco said quietly. " I'm still a virgin too. I haven't even come close."

They were both silent, the sharing of deep secrets weaving around them and creating a separate world where only they existed. Their feet trudged through the slushy streets, occasionally glancing at each other, wondering where to take the conversation from here. Harry was thinking that Draco's earlier assertion was right: these confessions would have been easier if they'd both been drunk. He made mental note to pick up some serious alcohol on the way home.

" So have you always known you were gay?" Harry asked.

" I'm not really sure I'm gay, either," Draco said, voice pensive. Seeing Harry's look of confusion, he struggled to find a way of explaining what had taken him two years of seclusion to even begin understanding. " It's like this: you're gay if you're attracted to members of your own sex, you're straight if you're attracted to the opposite sex, and your bi if you're attracted by members in either group."

" So far nothing I didn't know by age twelve, but continue," Harry ordered. Draco rolled his eyes,

" What I'm trying to point out is that the key aspect of all definitions, is that you must be attracted."

" You're not going to say you've never been attracted to anyone before? That's ridiculous," Harry scoffed.

" Ah, but what is attraction? Take me for instance, I am, outwardly, highly attractive", Draco said, no hint of shame.

" And so modest," Harry muttered. " You might be attractive, but then you open your mouth and the illusion disappears."

" Precisely my point. You, when you despised me, would never have seen me as attractive. It no longer mattered what I looked like, all that mattered was your perception of me."

" Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You're not exactly breaking new ground here," Harry interposed, determined to play the devil's advocate.

" So you admit, that it is possible to view someone as attractive or otherwise, without any mention of outward appearance?"

" Absolutely," Harry said.

" And that the only true attraction exists outside parameters of physical appearance?"

" For some people, I would say that's true."

" Therefore, for some people, true attraction can exist beyond even male or female distinctions,"

Draco said, summing up his argument.

" You being one of these enlightened people, I assume?"

" Harry, you know how fussy I am. I spend hours choosing which robe to wear..."

" That's not so weird," Harry interjected.

" They're all identical black robes," Draco explained.

" Oh, yeah, that's messed up."

" So, knowing that, can you imagine how seriously I take a relationship?"

" It's true, you are rather prissy. And fussy," Harry said solemnly.

" Yeah… hey!" Draco said offended; Harry just smiled.

" Go back to talking about your high and lofty ideals."

" Well, I was just saying that while I may have been momentarily distracted by a pretty face a few times, in all honesty, I've never been truly attracted to anyone, and since I don't know the gender yet of my eventual partner, I refuse to label myself."

" Perfection is hard to find, you know", Harry warned.

" I'm not looking for a perfect person; I'm looking for the person who is perfect for me. And I wager, in that respect, I'm no different then you."

" Ick. I'm like you? Disturbing."

" Shut-up," Draco said, half-scowling, half-smiling. "How many people know you're gay?"

" Ron and Hermione. Dumbledore - just because he knows everything. Most of the people I've met here know; there didn't seem much point in lying to them," Harry replied. " I remember when I first told Ron, he freaked out for a few minutes, and then decided that because I fancied boys, that I must fancy him. He used to wait until I fell asleep, before he would go to bed, scared I would 'make a move' while he slept," Harry said, laughing at the memory.

" Stupid git", Draco said, laughing also.

" Hey! He's still my best friend," said Harry.

" Nah, I didn't mean it like that. I meant that he was stupid to think you would ever fall for him."

Harry scrutinized his blonde companion. Draco kept his eyes directly forward. " Why… Why wouldn't I have ever gone after Ron? I mean: I knew he was straight, but I might still have had feelings for him. Just because I never did, doesn't mean it would have been impossible."

" Simple. Ron falls in and out of love with great rapidity. Even I know that from the few occasions I met with him while at Hogwart's. You, however, are like me, and will not be with someone unless you think it's going be taken seriously. I'll even go so far as to say that I think you're unlikely to fall in love more then once or twice in your entire life. Knowing a relationship with Ron would most likely be an experiment, and temporary, you would never have let yourself fall for him."

" I suppose that makes sense. I always did envy Ron his ability to date for fun. For me it was always such a major upheaval, that I tended to avoid it whenever possible. I really didn't want to be queer. I still feel like I'm getting used to it, and maybe that's why I've never really been with anyone."

" If it helps, I have another reason why I never slept around, other then not having met the right person."

" Yeah, and what's that?"

" Sex is disgusting."

" What?" Harry burst out. Draco's face was slightly scrunched up, as though there was something distasteful about his surroundings.

" You know what I'm like, how I like to have everything in its correct place, all neat and clean and organized. I used to freak out when I got black ink on my black robes, for Merlin's sake. Sex is all about touching someone's skin, sweating and groaning. Becoming covered in fluids that under normal circumstances you wouldn't hesitate to wash away at the nearest opportunity. It's just so… messy."

" Messy?" Harry repeated incredulously. " You don't want to have sex, because you don't want to get dirty?"

" I didn't say I never wanted to have sex. I just think, that if I'm going to do it, then it would have to be with someone I trust as implicitly as I trust myself. To do something like that with just anyone is repulsive. Who knows where they've been?"

Harry laughed gently, not laughing at Draco, but seeing the humour in Draco's analytic description of the act. " So what about, um, you know?"

" What are you talking about?"

" Well, what about touching yourself? Do you think that's too disgusting also?"

" Oh. That. To me that's just something you have to do to take care of your body; like brushing your teeth." At Harry's derisive snort of laughter, Draco reddened slightly, " Okay, not quite the same as brushing your teeth. But it's still just you. Letting someone else do that to you? Being so out of control and vulnerable, knowing that if they were to leave you that it would be utterly shaming and humiliating. It's easier to forgive an enemy then a friend; imagine the power a lover would have?"

" Easier to forgive an enemy, huh? Guess that explains how I'm able to tolerate you. And your silly speeches that are really just trying to conceal the fact that you're a hopeless virgin," Harry said.

The supermarket was visible in the distance, and it seemed the appropriate time to lighten the mood. Draco seemed to agree, as he punched Harry in the shoulder for the slight, and grinned.

" I don't know why I bother talking to you. Uncultured swine," Draco said in the most superior of his voices.

Surrounding the supermarket was a very inadequately sized parking lot, and, consequently, a great number of cars circling the lot, waiting for a space. The cars were not very patient, and Harry and Draco were shouted and beeped at as they cut across the pavement to the entrance. Draco was still trying to figure out the rules regarding traffic – red means stop, green means go, were easy enough, but the sheer number of signs and regulations was overwhelming. As a result, he remained leery of the fast moving automobiles, and followed so closely on Harry's heels that he stepped on the backs of Harry's shoes twice.

The supermarket was bustling with customers, all seemingly in a hurry. One particularly large woman with badly dyed blonde hair, charged into Draco, who was standing and gawking in the store's electronic doorway, nearly knocking him over. Harry grabbed his sleeve, and dragged him out of the way.

Draco approved of the automatic doors; the frivolous use of energy was a sign of luxury – something he always respected. The supermarket itself was a marvel: the seemingly endless rows; aisles and aisles of brightly packaged ingredients, in millions of sizes, shapes, and textures. The gleaming bottles filled with every colour liquid imaginable, exotic fruits and vegetables, many of which Draco had never seen before, and the subtle promise of the spice rack, from which pungent smells could still be appreciated. Shiny floors, bright lights, and endless possibilities all laid out for him with cool efficiency. It was awe-inspiring.

Unfortunately, when Draco stopped gaping and looked around him, he realized he had lost Harry. The panic and fear was immediate, his heart thudding with sudden severity in his chest. His silvery head whipped around, desperately searching the throng of people. Suddenly, all the people, who had seemed harmlessly anonymous before when Harry was with him, began looking like people he knew; people who might conceivably be looking for him. Fear scrabbled in his belly like some wild animal, twisting and tearing at his insides until he was visibly

shaking. He felt small and weak, and ready to crumble into a small ball and let the darkness fold-in on him; bury him. A hand on his shoulder made him jump, and leap back with a small shriek.

" Shit, sorry, didn't mean to scare you. Got us a cart, where to first?" Harry asked. Draco's mouth opened and closed, as he felt cold roiling fear being slowly replaced with warm relief. He ran a hand through his hair, seeking composure, before closing his hands into clammy fists.

" So many people… I didn't know where you'd gone," Draco said tensely.

" I was getting a cart, like I just told you. Now, you're the expert here, what do we get?"

Though Harry wasn't aware of the depth of Draco's anxiety, he knew that his companion was nervous and he deliberately kept Draco distracted with inane questions and silly jokes. Twice he made himself the fool, successfully getting Draco to think-up some snide comment in response. Then again, he honestly didn't know how to use spices beyond those of salt and pepper. What the hell was oregano, anyway?

They did pick up some alcohol, which, combined with the groceries, made what they were carrying rather heavy. Or, more accurately, it made what Harry was carrying quite heavy. Draco had played up his recent illness so that he would only be expected to carry the very lightest of items. Harry growled, but didn't beleaguer the point. They decided to take the metro back to the flat, to lessen Harry's load. Draco took the stairs two at a time, and arrived at the platform ahead of Harry. He was looking down the track, seeing if the train was arriving, when he spotted a familiar blonde head in the crowd.

The bags he was clutching fell to the ground heedlessly, a few items spilling out. His gaze was fixed on the man with the blonde hair, broad shoulders, and arrogant stance. Lucius; his father. Pain in his chest flared like fire before he remembered he had to breathe. How had Lucius found him? Why was he waiting here, not even looking at Draco? Was his intention to make Draco panic, cause a scene, make it so that Draco betrayed himself, and Lucius remained innocent?

He felt tears prick the corners of his eyes, because his freedom was about to be taken away. Everything he had planned, the most mundane of hopes, was now denied him: all because of that man.

In the store he had been frightened; here, he was terrified. The man began turning slowly towards him, and Draco could only watch, rooted to the spot. It was like in his nightmares, when the darkest demons came after him, and there was nothing he could do but scream soundlessly. The whole world around him faded to nothing, until all he could see was the man, coming closer, the black overcoat and heavy scarf he was wearing obscuring all features, making him seem more like a sinister spectre, then a human being. Draco heard himself whimper, and he bit his lip to keep it from becoming any louder. Warm coppery blood filled his mouth, but he barely noticed.

Then, just as suddenly as the onslaught had appeared, the ordeal was over. The man grinned and shook hands with another man, and it was perfectly obvious that the blonde man was not Lucius at all. There was no trap for Draco, no reason to suspect that he had been discovered at all. His heart returned to its normal rhythm, and his lungs unclenched so that he could breathe freely and without pain. The fear was no longer a sharp knife to his gut, though enough apprehension remained to cause a dull ache that sapped his energy.

It came gradually to his awareness that Harry was gripping him by the shoulders, and shaking him none to gently.

" What the fuck is going on? Are you okay? What's wrong?" Harry practically screamed at him.

Draco knew he was expected to push Harry away, and to make up some excuse for his actions, but he was still trembling, both inside and out. Numbly, he stooped and began gathering up the fallen articles. Harry sighed before bending down to help him.

" We have to talk about this," Harry said gently.

" I know," Draco replied, voice quavering. It was just as he had predicted. The excursion had been a bad idea: confessions were at hand.

The train arrived before Harry could say anything else, and there was a scramble as people pushed their way inside. In the compartment there was standing room only, and Harry and Draco were pushed up alongside each other.

Draco was dimly aware of Harry's concern, but mostly he was lost in his own thoughts. The train lurched, Draco stumbled into Harry, and found comfort in his warmth. He didn't step back. Instead, Draco leaned against Harry and shut his eyes, not really caring at the moment what Harry might think. He didn't have the strength to resist what he so sorely needed.

Draco felt Harry shuffle slightly against his body, and felt the bags at their feet being pushed into a more orderly pile. And then, he felt a very tentative arm come around his waist.

Harry's arm did not tighten, nor did it pull Draco any closer. It just wrapped around Draco gently, anchoring him. When they arrived at their stop, the arm disappeared, though it seemed that they could both still feel the connection.

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Chapter: 4

Hi! So sorry for the long delay – I've been insanely busy, I swear, but to all the questions: yes, I

will be finishing this. I've got big things planned. I've just been kind-of down because they took down my story that had 1150 reviews. To anyone who read that, thanks for the support. I've also had a few people voice disproval at this change in venue (Harry Potter slash), so I'm especially grateful for those who wrote kind things – reminds me that the whole world isn't prejudiced. Happy Thanksgiving to my fellow Canadians! Enjoy!

How was it possible for silence to be so noisy? Draco pondered this and a multitude of other things as he and Harry headed back to the flat. They hadn't spoken a word to each other, though Draco was well aware of Harry constantly looking at him as though he was expecting another collapse at any moment. So he was a little shaky, so what? Draco slipped on a patch of ice, and despite all that he was carrying, Harry's hand reached out impulsively to steady him. Draco roughly pulled his arm away and stalked on ahead. He wasn't an invalid; he wasn't weak. At least, he didn't want Harry to think he was.

Draco headed to the kitchen the moment the front door was unlocked, and began slamming the food items into the cupboards haphazardly. Long before he had run out of items to put away, his anger had faded and he was hollow again, with that horrible empty feeling rising in him, threatening to choke the very air he was breathing. He had spent so long trying to fool himself that nothing was wrong, that he had forgotten how to feel much of anything. The fear experience, and the bitterness, after so long a period of feeling nothing, had hit him so hard that the emotions were still making him dizzy. He felt, rather then saw, Harry's eyes resting on him.

" I'd rather eat first," Draco said softly, not turning around.

" Okay," Harry said simply. They ate dinner, the tense atmosphere making conversation beyond one word questions and answers impossible. Wordlessly, they rose from the table, and if Draco spent a little longer then usual washing the dishes, then Harry thought it best not to mention it.

It was Harry who mixed two rather large glasses of rum and coke, and gestured for Draco to follow him into the living room. They sat facing each other; Draco curled protectively into the armchair, Harry on the floor, his back against the sofa. Harry waited patiently, staring at a spot on the carpet. When Draco eventually spoke, Harry nearly jumped in surprise.

" Were you scared when you faced off against Voldemort?"

" Well, of course I was," Harry said.

" I can't see you being scared. I know you must have been afraid, but somehow, I don't just don't see it. I wish I was like that," Draco said wistfully. " I wish I didn't wake up afraid everyday."

" What are you afraid of?"

" Life. Death. Everything," Draco said. He smirked humourlessly, " But I suppose you want specifics, not vague clichés."

" What made you so afraid today?"

" I thought I saw my father," Draco said clearly.

" I don't understand," Harry responded.

" I spent the last two years of my life a prisoner in my own house. I know it sounds unbelievable; someone my age locked into a small room for so long by his father. You would think someone would notice, would question my whereabouts. But I had no friends to wonder at my sudden absence, and nobody was willing to pry very hard at my father's excuse that I was at Durmstrang, finishing my education. Only my mother knew where I was, and she had never intervened before on my behalf. So, my father took away my wand, took away my freedom, and kept me cold and hungry, waiting for me to obey as I was supposed to."

" What did he want you to do?"

" Be the perfect son, of course," Draco said bitterly. " If you want a specific action, then he wanted me by his side when he made his latest attempt at power, because every politician needs a smiling, happy family in the background. With Voldemort dead, Hogwart's destroyed, and the whole magic-world up in arms about the draining of magical energies, my father thought it was the perfect opportunity to advance his standing. Oh, nothing so lavish as Voldemort's 'world-domination' scheme. No, subtlety was the key. Gather a group of purebred friends and colleagues, finance their elections, have them take office, and slowly begin to alter magic policy. My father himself wants to be the minister of magic, and if nobody dares to run against him, he'll win. He's very shrewd, my father, very intelligent, a political genius, and quite insane. Once he gets the power he wants, he'll eradicate any opposition, and then he'll be unstoppable. He has the means, the opportunity, and what's worse, he believes in what he's doing."

" How did you get out?"

" Strangely enough, it was my mother. I don't know why she did it, but when she found out my father was going to kill me, she got me a cloak and a broom, and told me to leave."

" And you came here. Do I want to know why?" Harry asked. Draco jerked out of his reminisces at the hard edge he heard in Harry's voice. He polished off the rest of his drink, trying to dispel the sudden chill that crept over his skin.

" Pardon me?"

" You heard me. What the fuck do you want from me?"

The steady composure, with which Draco had managed to tell his tale, began to wear thin and crack. He had expected many reactions from Harry, but not this one of bitterness, anger, and hurt.

" I… I don't want anything from you."

" Bullshit, Malfoy, and you know it. You could have gone anywhere, to anyone. But you came to me. We were never friends; I never gave you any reason to think I wouldn't shut the door on you. Obviously, you came for a reason. So what do you want? Want me to kill Lucius for you? Maybe knock-off a few of his buddies while I'm at it? Maybe you want me to write a letter to the minister, to Dumbledore, and get Lucius put under surveillance. The 'Boy-Who-Killed-Voldemort' – surely, his word would be believed. Hell, maybe you want me to run against Lucius in the elections? Or how about a protection spell? A memory charm? What the fuck is it?"

Harry knew he was yelling. He knew that he was being irrationally angry with Draco, at a most inopportune time. He knew he was expected to console and comfort, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. He was tired of feeling used.

" Maybe because I thought you, of all people, would understand. People expect things from me because of who my father is. They hear the rumours and think they're all true. They think I had the perfect childhood; well, that's crap. Every aspect of my life has been planned out for me since before I could think. Who I could be friends with, what I was to wear, how to behave, when to wake-up in the morning, what to eat… The list goes on. I had money, true enough. I had a powerful name, and every advantage growing up that a wizard could have, but do you know what my first memory is? It's of my father, slapping my face for spilling a glass of water at the dinner table – a dinner table I could barely see over. I get knocked off my feet for trying to clean up the spill – Malfoy's aren't supposed to stoop to menial tasks, you know. Then I get to lose consciousness for daring to ask why," Draco said, any semblance of control long lost. He was angry, and his eyes were flashing dangerously. Harry, however, had no intention of letting up.

" That doesn't make us alike. I had a horrible childhood too, but it didn't turn me into a prick. Time you found a new excuse."

" When I said I wasn't going to follow Voldemort, my father tried to come and get me, but Dumbledore protected me and let me stay at Hogwart's. He said I'd never have to go back, but he lied. When my father saw that Voldemort was going to lose the war, he sold every secret he knew in return for protection, and when he did that, there was no reason to keep me from his side. They sold me out for the stuff my father knew; I was used, and I know you were too."

" But that's where it ended for you, didn't it? They used you, maybe, but then they forgot about you. Do you have any idea what it's like to be 'Harry Potter'? I hate it. I hate that I can't ever truly get away from it, and that everything I'm ever told is only a semblance of the truth. I'm still being lied to, still being used," Harry snapped back, arms crossed over his chest tightly.

" The only truth I've ever known is that I hate my father, just as you hated Voldemort," Draco said emphatically. " What was it like, when you killed him?"

" I don't have to answer that. This isn't a deal we're making: you tell me your secrets and I'll tell you mine."

" Damn it Harry, if I knew you were this fucking paranoid…"

" Fine!" Harry exclaimed, anger bolstering his flailing confidence. Besides, he had always wanted a chance to explain, and maybe, Draco really could understand.

"I don't suppose you know much about the end of the war, since you were locked up for most of it, but it went like this. Voldemort, knowing he was doomed to fail anyway, decided on one more big battle, just to secure his immortality as the worst villain ever. He concentrated his attack on Hogwart's, our headquarters, where he knew I would be. If I'd know beforehand, I would have drawn him out to battle elsewhere, away from the school where so many students were still seeking refuge. But I didn't know, and he came so quickly that there was no option left. Hogwart's was packed with people, all waiting for me to set things right again. Waiting for me to kill. And I did. I'd like to say it was skill on my part, but by the end, I was so exhausted that I doubt I was even thinking straight. One lucky shot, and he went down, along with the rest of Hogwart's. The war was over. At least my part of it was, but the aftermath… I awoke in a makeshift infirmary, and heard all about it from my bed. How Hogwart's was razed to the ground because of the battle, that people had dies within its walls when it fell, and that it would take years to rebuild. I listened as the exhausted medical workers bemoaned the draining of the earth's magic. My battle with Voldemort caused a sort-of magical vacuum, sucking some places completely dry, so that magic could only be performed around certain hotspots. Even now I'm told the magic is spread pretty thin", Harry said, his voice monotone.

" It's true, but it's not too bad anymore. Malfoy manor was on a hotspot anyway, as was Hogwart's. They were able to rebuild very quickly because of that. Students went back last year."

" I know that. I still get the Daily Prophet delivered. Besides, Ron was thinking of attending and finishing up his schooling there, he still might this year. Hermione took correspondence instead. But I'm getting off track. I was still in that bed when I heard there were still hundreds of witches and wizards missing and presumed dead. I got to watch as people came in to the hospital and left with tears in their eyes. Death, sickness, hardship, suffering, and pain, was all we were left with."

" That's the finale of any war", Draco said. He felt exhausted, drained. Somewhere during their quasi-argument, having finished their first few drinks, they'd grabbed a bottle of wine. Draco returned to his seat, and took a deep gulp from his glass. He was shocked when he heard the sound of a glass breaking. Harry had squeezed his goblet and shattered it, the pieces of glass cutting into his hand, the burgundy wine and blood running down his wrists in thin rivulets onto the carpet.

" Maybe. But it was not the way people expected *this* war to end. They came to me by the thousands, their eyes shining with emotion, waiting for me to make things better. It didn't matter

to them that I was merely one among an entire army; it was me they came to for salvation, for absolution, me they wanted to blame when it didn't come. They looked at me imploringly, wondering why I hadn't saved Hogwart's, asking why their husband, or their wife, or their daughter or son had died when Harry Potter was alive and well. I wasn't supposed to just win the war; I was supposed to save the world. Being Harry Potter meant that, after the war, I was supposed to make everything go back to how it was, and be even better then before. They wanted me to perform miracles, but they didn't realize that I was only human; that what they were asking was impossible. Gradually, the adulation slowed. I left the hospital. I tried to help with the repairs, and yet everywhere I went, they saw the scar, and waited for me to live up to some impossible standard. They were so disillusioned that I wasn't perfect, that it killed me every time I had to look into someone's eyes.

And if you think it was different with my friends, you'd be wrong. Ron shook my hand, told me I'd been 'bloody brilliant' and all the time his eyes were asking why I hadn't saved his father. Hermione cried when she saw I was okay, and yet she already had plans to get away, to move on. I wasn't the saviour other's had claimed me to be, and she was just as disappointed as everyone else."

" We're more alike then I thought then. We both thought we'd be long dead before we had to deal with the consequences of our actions. I did some mighty stupid things, trying to live up to expectations, acting on beliefs that weren't even my own, and I was counting on the fact that I'd be dead before any of it mattered. And you're the same, even if you deny it. You spent your whole life gearing up for a battle you thought would kill you. Must have been a real kick-in-the-head to realize life goes on; to wake-up and realize people resented the fact that you were still living, when so many were dead. I understand that; the fear that comes with the realization that you're expected to come to terms with something you've never really faced and then to move-on from it," Draco said, the epiphany of uncovering where his fear actually stemmed from strangely soothing. He wondered if Harry felt the same relief, or if the damage done to the 'Boy-Who-Lived' was simply too severe.

Harry let the pieces of his former glass fall from his grasp. He picked a few remaining shards free from his palm, before daring to look up at Draco. He had never told anyone about such feelings, hadn't even known that he felt most of it. That he resented being made to feel a failure. That he felt hated for doing exactly what they had told him to do. For all his power, for all his potential, in the end, what had he accomplished? He had not brought back his parents, and he was still alone. It wasn't necessary for the world to blame him; he could do that well enough himself.

Draco ventured to break the silence, wishing he knew what was circulating in Harry's head that could make him look so very frail and isolated. He wanted Harry to know that he wasn't alone anymore, that they could sort each other out now. He spoke carefully, knowing the subject was going to be a sensitive one, " So maybe we're both running scared, and maybe I'm here because you've never lied to me or used me."

" I'm not running away," Harry interjected.

" Then why are you here?" Draco asked gently, already anticipating the answer.

" I had to leave the people who saw me as a disappointing hero, as a pathetic little puppet. I had to leave because the concept people had of me, was ruined whenever they met me. Because they didn't want a real person, they wanted some immortal superhero. So I came here where I was simply Harry Potter. Here I'm the Harry Potter who has a little flat on Cheshire road, who pays his bills on time, who works in a small bookshop, who talks to the postman, watches wrestling on television, who wrote an interesting paper on marginalized literature, and who occasionally goes out on Saturday night's, clubbing with his friends. Nobody here expects me to be perfect, and nobody gets hurt when I fail. I'm not letting anyone down here. I'm happy here because I'm *that* Harry Potter, and it's enough."

Draco's eyes were dark, their gaze fixed on the wall, yet seeing something else entirely. Harry watched his movements as though they were in slow motion, seeing him lift his glass to his lips, the perfectly red liquid staining his cavernous mouth, lowering again, and still not a whisper, not a sound from him.

" Are you even fucking listening?" Harry practically screamed at him.

" I'm thinking I envy you."

" Don't envy me. Don't tell me you wish you could be me, because that trivialises what I'm feeling. Makes me think I have no right to feel bad about anything at all," Harry said tersely.

" You want me to feel sorry for you? To tell you that everyone was wrong not to drop to your feet and praise the ground you walk on?"

" That's the last thing I want", Harry muttered. He was angry that the one person he opened up to, the one person he thought would understand, couldn't see why he was hurting.

" I know that's not what you want. It's why I'm trying so hard to understand what you're going through. Because nobody on earth will ever go through what you are, and I don't know how to help you."

" Like hell. You're thinking I'm a pathetic waste of space, that I ought to suck it up, and stop feeling sorry for myself."

" Don't ever tell me what I'm thinking", Draco said coldly, eyes narrowing. " I admire what you've done. You could have lived off their respect and praise forever, but instead you wanted to make it on your own. You carved out your own niche, worked at it, got on with a real life. The only thing you've got wrong is this fucking self-loathing you're carrying around. Shit, you're allowed to be happy, Harry. Nobody's going to come around and take it away from you. Don't tell me you still have some damn useless 'fear of abandonment' issues."

" The whole world has already gotten rid of me – they're still admiring someone who doesn't even exist. I'm tired of throwing myself into things, and getting nothing back. It hurts too much."

" That's not the problem, and you know it. You were expecting to die, and now that you're alive, you don't know if you can. You're afraid."

" Yes, I'm afraid. Okay? Does that satisfy whatever sick sadistic pleasure you get from seeing me suffer? I'm scared that it will always be like this, that I'll always feel like a failure who hasn't lived up to his potential, that because I'm not perfect I'll always be alone." Harry could feel the tears starting to form in his eyes, and he hated it. He hated Malfoy for making him feel all this pain. Hated him.

" Open your eyes, you fucking idiot, and realize that for once, you're not the worst off. I feel the same fear you do, the same pain of being alone, but you don't need to go making up all this other crap just to make yourself feel worse. If you don't want to be alone, then don't be. You have a choice, I still don't", Draco said, voice so loud it rattled in Harry's ears. He could see Draco's pulse-point racing, the anger in his eyes shining forth like he meant to freeze him on the spot. And it made Harry see red. He lunged at Draco, knocking the flimsy coffee table away, and slamming into him.

" I was wrong, what I said to you before, about not owing me anything for staying here? Seems to me if you get to yell at me, humiliate me, then there ought to be some compensation", Harry said.

Draco was struggling, trying to keep Harry's hands from circling his throat, to keep his body from sliding across the floor and into the wall. It was a lost cause as Harry became like a man possessed, his strength more then enough to keep Draco pinned to the ground. Draco grunted as a fist connected first with his stomach, and then his ribs. They rolled into the wall, and Draco's head hit the baseboard with a thunk. Growing desperate, he swung his fist, connecting hard with Harry's nose and face, and spinning his glasses to the floor. A trickle of blood formed and ran down Harry's chin. Draco made to strike him again, and Harry grabbed Draco's slender wrist and pushed it up against the wall, where it bent into an awkward and painful position. Draco thrust his hand up and tried to relieve the manacle-like grip, but soon, both hands were pinned above his head, and Harry was bearing down on him, green eyes alive and half-crazed. Draco closed his eyes, waiting for a fist to the face.

Rough lips descended, against his own, hard, bruising and punishing. It hurt. The pressure around his wrists and over his prone form increased, digging him into the floor. The lips slammed his again, opened and nipped with sharp white teeth, damaging him, even as he opened his mouth to the invasion. He couldn't help it; the feelings were too powerful, too overwhelming. Draco felt himself surrendering, even as he continued to struggle weakly against Harry. A tongue brushed the inside of his mouth, batting his own tongue aside as it devoured him, pulled him apart, and made him whimper. As though coming out of fog, Harry's tongue retreated, and Draco let go of a breath he didn't know he had been holding. In that moment,

Harry bit down hard on Draco's lower lip, drawing blood just before he pushed himself away in disgust.

Silence reigned, broken only by the sound of ragged breathing. Draco watched as Harry drew himself into a ball, wrapping his arms over his head as though he could physically push the feelings back into the forgotten recesses of his mind where they belonged. Draco lifted a hand to his lip and winced. He rubbed the blood away, and sat up,

" Why?"

" Because I'm not perfect", Harry said, dropping his head onto his knees. He began to shake and shudder; the fact that Harry wasn't crying was somehow worse then if he'd been sobbing his heart out. Draco knew he had a choice to make: whether to put himself into that unknown void and take what he wanted, or to keep safe by staying away from all that was Harry. This was his chance to be someone again, to face life again. The sight of Harry's soul bleeding onto the floor, made the choice easy.

Draco stood up and walked towards Harry, sinking down next to him on the floor. Putting both arms around Harry's shoulders he held him, all the time rubbing soothing hands up and down his back. He felt Harry freeze up and begin to panic, but Draco just gripped him tighter, forcing him deeper into the embrace. With a tiny mewl of need, Harry felt himself give in, to turn slightly in Draco's arms and to brace himself against his chest. Draco still said nothing, giving Harry time to work out what he wanted.

Harry buried his head into the crook of Draco's neck, as though if he made himself small enough, he could disappear forever into Draco's warmth. When he spoke, his voice was depleted, worn-out.

" I hit you", Harry said.

" You did", Draco replied calmly.

" I yelled at you, I bit you, I kissed you", Harry said, almost disbelieving he had done those very actions.

" All of the above", Draco returned.

" Then why didn't you leave? You were supposed to leave", Harry said plaintively.

" Since when have I ever done what you told me, Potter?" Draco said arrogantly. Harry, unbelievably, almost felt like laughing. " Oh, and believe me when I say I'll be getting back at you for the undeserved thrashing you gave me. Not now, of course, but someday. I think I know why you did it, want to tell me your version?"

" I don't know why."

" Yes, you do", Draco said forcefully.

" Because I wanted to show you I'm not perfect, maybe. Give you suitable excuse to leave, because I hate the things you make me feel. Hell, maybe I did it just to see how you'd react, how the fuck should I know?"

" Maybe it was just hatred," Draco suggested. " I hate you some days, more then anything. Hate that you make me weak, hate that you make me want things I can never have, hate that I'm powerless against you. Most of all I hate you for giving me hope – I'd have given up a long time ago, and happily become nothing, if it hadn't been for you. I hate you for making me alive. And thank you for it too."

" This is really going to hurt later, and I don't mean the bruises," Harry said finally.

" Yeah. It's going to all fall apart, probably. We're too screwed up for anything else."

" Then I guess… we'll have to try really hard not to fail," Harry stuttered. He knew that he was asking Draco to trust him. He knew how hard it would be for Draco to do so, and what it would mean if he did. He knew that he was setting himself up for rejection, but he couldn't seem to stop the words flowing from his mouth.

" I never fail," Draco said with sudden conviction. He saw Harry's eyes widen in surprise at his tone, and Draco took advantage of the unguarded moment to run his fingers down Harry's face, which was beginning to bruise.

" I really nailed you," Draco said suddenly, breaking the moment. He grinned maliciously.

" Please, I let you hit me. It was too embarrassingly one-sided," Harry said.

" I bet I could take you down right now, easily," Draco boasted.

" You definitely could," Harry said. Draco glowed, satisfied, and Harry grinned impishly. " Because I'd let you."

Draco snorted contemptuously, and surprised Harry by pushing him flat to the floor. " See? I win. Just be glad I have no intention of adding to the destruction on your face."

" Why not?"

" Because your face is bad enough as it is, even without the bruises," Draco smirked. " You know, I think this is the cliché moment where I'm supposed to kiss you."

" Oh?" Harry said, trying to sound unaffected.

" We're emotional, adrenaline is running high, and I have you pinned to the floor. Yes, it would make perfect sense to kiss you now." Draco revelled in the small spark that lit up Harry's green eyes briefly. " But this fight wasn't about sex and I don't want to further confuse the issue."

Draco pushed lightly against Harry's chest as he got to his feet. He reached out a hand to help Harry up off the floor.

" And what is the issue exactly?" asked a befuddled Harry. One moment he wanted one thing, and the next moment he wanted something at the other extreme. Confusion ruled his mind to the point where he felt like a child needing someone's hand as guidance. He rubbed at his eyes, hoping it wasn't still noticeable that he'd been fighting tears.

Draco seemed to think about his question for a moment, before saying quietly, " That you don't want to be who you are, and that I don't know who I am."

Silence greeted his assertion, until Harry muttered a sombre, but highly sarcastic, " Deep."

Draco took one look at Harry, who was trying to keep a straight face, and couldn't help smiling also.

" That's what you get for buying such cheap wine," Draco said.

" In vino veritus," Harry muttered.

" Time for bed," Draco said. He took Harry by the hand, leading him towards the bedroom. Harry followed mutely; content to let someone else make the decisions and relieve him of the burden. Some dim corner of his mind insisted on recalling the current sleeping arrangements. " I'm on the couch, remember?"

" Do we really need to maintain that illusion anymore?" Draco asked. " You did kiss me Harry, albeit very badly. I know what that means, even if I'm too pissed at you now, due to the condition of my lip, to reciprocate."

Harry blushed, and ducked into the bathroom to change into his pyjamas before Draco noticed. He brushed his teeth and successfully avoided looking in the mirror – he had had more then enough self-introspection for one night. He climbed into bed, while Draco went to brush his own teeth. Draco was gone quite a long time.

" I swear you preen more then is healthy for a normal human being," Harry said, when Draco slipped into his side of the bed. Unconsciously, they both held themselves to the very edges of their respective sides, no matter how indifferent or disciplined they claimed to be. Just because their altercation had opened up a new door for them, didn't mean they were prepared to walk through it just yet.

" The 'I just got out of bed after a particularly good wet dream' look for hair may work for you,

but not all of us are that fortunate," Draco said, voice drowsy.

" You know, that's not the first time I've heard my hair described that way," Harry said. Draco snorted, burying his head in his pillow. Now was the time for sleep, and yet Harry wasn't picking up on the not-so subtle hints.

" I should have shut the door in your face when you arrived; it would have been the smart thing to do."

" Nobody ever claimed you were smart," Draco said, the insult coming almost automatically. " Now, let me sleep, or I'll make you go back to the couch."

" How would you make me? With those girly arms of yours?"

" If anyone's a girl here, it's you, because you won't shut-up."

Harry rolled his eyes in exasperation, " Goodnight, Draco."

" It would be if a certain inconsiderate lout would stop talking," Draco muttered. He pulled his pillow over his head, and effectively put a stop to any further conversation.

Harry stared up at the ceiling, trying not to smile. Still, it was uncanny how close he had come to predicting the way in which Draco would say goodnight. Maybe he knew Draco Malfoy better then he had realized.

When Harry woke-up the next morning, he was in his bed, which was a novelty he had not experienced for quite some time. He could also smell the makings of breakfast, and contemplated getting up. After twenty minutes of dozing in the cozy confines of his bed, he stumbled to his feet and made his way to the kitchen.

Draco was rather lost in thought, and didn't hear the sounds of Harry getting up. When Harry yawned widely and slumped into a chair at the table, still dressed in the boxers and t-shirt he had slept in, and without his glasses, Draco nerves sent so many messages all at once that it was hard to stay standing.

Draco recalled when he had said to Harry that he had never truly felt an attraction for someone else. It was as if his entire life he'd been blindfolded while everyone else had perfect vision. He remembered walking down the hallways at school, noticing how his companions would turn to watch a girl go by with rapt attention, but never being inclined to do so himself. He could remember with perfect clarity those occasions when his friends would talk about how good looking some celebrity was, how much they'd like to date someone they knew, how hot, sexy, cute, some person was. And he was always left feeling vaguely confused. He simply didn't understand how it was that mere attraction could occupy so entirely the minds of his classmates. Love was even harder to figure. He had never understood how it was that people could do such insane, silly, idiotic things for the sake of some emotion. Draco had always felt like an outsider:

observing the habits and rituals of the people around him, but never being able to join in.

Because he hadn't understood attraction. He hadn't understood that heart palpitating moment when you see first catch sight of the object of your affection. He hadn't felt that same giddy rush of emotion, which made you feel incapable of thought, and brought the most ridiculous of smiles to your face, by merely recognizing someone's voice. He had never experienced that mind-alternating state of being completely infatuated with someone else, of being willing to do anything to please them, to protect them, and to just be near them. He hadn't – until now.

The blindfold had been suddenly and savagely ripped from his eyes, and he blinkingly stepped into this dazzling new world. For he felt everything he'd been oblivious to before: every reaction, every strange urge, every lustful thought, every passion, and desire, and need, all at this moment, and all because he was looking at Harry.

Harry looked up, saw the strange expression in Draco's eyes, and shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny. He had the sudden impulse to run fingers through his sleep-matted hair, and to straighten the rumbled shirt he was wearing. He swallowed the toast he was munching on, crumbs falling thickly to the table, as he said crankily,

" What? Something wrong with my face?"

Draco wondered if he could be heard over the pounding of his heart, if he could speak past the sudden ache of longing that lodged in his throat. His voice, when he eventually spoke, came out hoarse as though it wasn't accustomed to use.

" There's nothing wrong with you, Harry," Draco paused, collecting his thoughts. " And I've only just noticed."

End of Part 4

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Chapter: 5

A very long, juicy chapter to sink your teeth into. I worked my butt off (unfortunately, not literally), to get this out quickly, and I think you'll like it, but tell me what you think, okay? I've absolutely loved the reviews so far – thanks so much. Enjoy!

Something was different, Harry decided, as he ate his breakfast, occasionally casting looks at his blond companion. It was quieter then usual, not that they ever talked much in the morning, and there was something about the way Draco was still staring at him. Like he was hungry, which didn't make sense since Harry knew Draco had already eaten his breakfast. Also, Draco was

fidgety when he was never fidgety, and it looked as though he didn't know what to do with his hands. Yes, something was very different this morning, but it would have to wait until Harry had finished his third or fourth cup of coffee before he could begin to decipher the cause.

Having been suddenly confronted (more like blind-sided), with the ability to feel attraction, Draco was rapidly coming to terms with his emotions. Somebody should have warned him what he was getting into, but then again, it hadn't really been a conscious choice to fall for Harry Potter. And he hadn't exactly fallen; no, it was more like he had tripped. But he was definitely gathering momentum, and it might turn out to be that he really was falling in… Draco frowned; it was too soon to be thinking such thoughts. Especially when you considered he was still feeling confused, angry, and hurt, in combination with the positive feelings. All these conflicting thoughts: it was disconcerting to say the least.

How was he to act around Harry now? How to suppress the singularly odd compulsion he had to slide across the table, and taste for himself whether that mouth was as delectable as it appeared? How to let Harry know that he wanted something of a romantic nature between them? And how to be sure that a relationship was something they both wanted anyway?

Draco had never flirted before; had never put himself out there in the hopes of garnering some affection. All those ridiculous things others did on a regular basis, that he, in his untouchable state, had sneered at, were now skills he wished he possessed. Of course, he was good at coercion and manipulation – or at least he had been. Was getting someone else to fall for you, that much different? How to make himself irresistible to a person who had definitely seen him at his worst, was a very tricky problem, one that Draco's brain refused to let drop.

Draco brushed his hand through his hair, knowing his cool façade had long since deserted him. He was hyper-aware of his body at the moment, having to concentrate just to remember to blink. Did he look okay? His cursory glance in the mirror that morning had assured him everything was in place, but anything could have happened in the few minutes since then. A hair might have become tangled, he might have splattered something on his clothes while cooking, or, God forbid, he might have stumbled into some bad lighting. Was he too pale? Not pale enough? Harry had wolfed down his breakfast in customary fashion, but supposing the toast had been a little on the burnt side, the eggs too runny? Draco smoothed down his borrowed T-shirt again, and tucked it in savagely to the loose waistband of his jeans. Too pretentious for the morning? Draco pulled the shirt back out in a panic. He ran shaking fingers through his hair again. Wait! Had he upset the natural part in his hair? A glance at his reflection in the metallic-sided toaster, reassured him somewhat. Though he worried about the width of his forehead, was that normal? Well, nothing he could do about bone-structure now. But his hands he could control: he put them 'casually' into his pockets, took them back out; hooked his thumbs into his belt loops, got them tangled, and struggled to free them; he clasped his hands behind his back; and just as he was beginning to wonder if twiddling his thumbs would look either sweet and charming, or neurotic and contrived, Harry interrupted his increasingly obsessive actions.

" Is something wrong?"

" Wrong? No. Why, does something look wrong?" Draco winced at the sound of his own voice. He'd already gone through puberty, thank you very much, was it necessary for his voice to start squeaking all of a sudden?

" You just seem kind-of jumpy. I'd lay off the caffeine if I were you," Harry said with a shrug. Breathing a sigh of relief that Harry was just as unaware of those around him as usual, Draco pulled out the kitchen chair across from Harry and sank into it gratefully. The table at least blocked him from the waist down – he could put his hands beneath it.

" I'm fine. Really," Draco said, smiling at Harry's unconvinced expression. " Just got a few things on my mind is all."

" Oh, I meant to say something about that. I mean, I know we don't really want to go into what happened last night again, but I just thought I should make it clear that nothing has changed."

" Nothing?" Draco intoned. How could Harry say it was nothing, when they'd revealed some of their deepest, darkest, secrets and fears? Did it mean nothing that they had fought each other, held each other, kissed, and ended up in the same bed? Albeit, the bed part wasn't nearly as interesting as it sounded, and the kiss had been quite punishing, completely one-sided, and certainly not in the much vaunted storybook style, but to say it meant nothing was a bit much. So far, it was the most intimate thing they had ever shared, and Harry had the sheer audacity to claim it meant nothing? Nothing? Well, he would just have to kiss Harry again and prove to him it certainly wasn't nothing…

" Draco? Are you even listening to me?" Harry asked. Draco had his arms crossed over his chest, and he was scowling, a determined glint in his eye. At Harry's query, Draco looked up guiltily, flushed red, and asked Harry to repeat himself. " I said, that nothing has changed; you can still stay here as long as you need to. I don't want to add to any of the stuff you're going through, and I just thought I'd tell you directly that finding a safe place to stay, isn't something you need to worry about right now."

" Oh. That," Draco replied sheepishly. Of course, Harry was being practical, not obsessing over near-kisses, and sudden infatuations. Draco mentally slapped himself.

" What did you think I meant?"

" Uhh, nothing," Draco stammered. If Harry wasn't going to bring up their relationship, if you could even call it that, then Draco wasn't going to either. Better to let time sort them out. To change the topic, Draco suggested, " I don't know how I'm going to repay you, Harry. I mean, I only have the money I came with and it's not much. It's yours, though. You know, for rent and food and stuff."

Harry shrugged. " Keep it, I've got enough money. What are your plans now, though? Do you think you want to get a job or something?"

Harry felt a sudden stab of… something. Almost like fear, but not so sharp. The thought of Draco getting a job, and his own place, moving out… Harry realized he really didn't care about the cost of supporting someone else, and in fact, he liked spending his inheritance on something worthwhile. He enjoyed having someone to come home to.

" I'm sort-of scared to go outside," Draco admitted softly.

" But you went out before," Harry responded.

" That was with you," Draco explained. " I know it's silly, that I'll have to get over it, but I can't help thinking that outside is this dark, scary place."

" So, it's not so much that you fear getting caught, but rather that you just feel vulnerable out there."

" Yeah. Stupid, but I think I'm going to get lost, and not find my way back. Maybe it's because I spent so long on my own, in a small room, not talking to people or interacting with them, but I get nervous being around crowds, around strangers, even just being in really big places. And I don't really understand how this muggle world works, and it makes me so sure I'm about to make a huge mistake. Can you understand that?"

" Sort-of. I can't imagine what it was like to be isolated for so long, but I think it makes sense that you would want to be alone more often. Do I bother you?"

" No. Quite the contrary. Sometimes I wake-up and I think I'm still there and it terrifies me, but then I realize I'm here and it's fine again. And it's people in general that frighten me, not individuals that I know. Like you, or even Mrs. Cooper. Crowds are just something I need to get used to again," Draco said.

" Well, then I'll have to take you out more often, and soon you'll be as arrogantly confident as ever," Harry said, grinning. It made Harry smile that Draco felt safe with him. At least for a little while, Draco was going to be dependent on him, and it was reassuring to Harry, knowing Draco couldn't run out on him. " In fact, we've been invited out for next Saturday night, with some friends of mine from school. Feel up to it?"

" I suppose. What will we do exactly?"

" Go clubbing, most likely," Harry said.

" Excuse me?"

" You know, we'll meet up somewhere, probably here, for a few drinks, and then head to a pub for a few more drinks. Then a club, for still more drinks, until we're drunk enough to believe we can dance, and possibly even drunk enough to sing, and then we'll come home smelling of alcohol and smoke, too tired to do more then crash, and then we'll wake-up, with killer

headaches, and swear we'll never, ever, drink again. And we'll wonder why it is we ever thought we could sing, when it's so clearly obvious in our sober states that we can't."

" Sounds fun," Draco said sardonically. " Kind-of like the house-parties we had at Hogwart's then?"

" Precisely. Only louder and with more alcohol."

" Understood. But if we do go, you need some new clothes for sure. I can only imagine what you've been going out in before I arrived," Draco said, a slight smug smile on his face.

" You just want me to get new clothes, so you can keep the ones you're borrowing," Harry teased.

" Please. I'm only wearing these out of necessity," Draco replied immediately.

" Then, you'll have to come shopping and get some new clothes too," Harry rejoined. Draco growled as he realized he had fallen quite easily into Harry's trap.

" Fine," Draco said through gritted teeth. " We'll both go shopping. But I don't have to like it."

Harry had classes that week, and work, so he was gone a good portion of the time. Draco was more or less content to stay in; he spent his time evenly divided between cooking, reading, and going insane.

It was entirely Harry's fault that he was going insane. Oh, Harry wasn't doing it on purpose, at least, Draco didn't think so, but Harry was managing to do it just the same. A little touch here, a small grin there - anything and everything sending Draco's pulse racing, and jangling his already sensitive nerves. Draco wondered if Harry was aware of even half of what he was doing. Did Harry know, that every morning, he would search out the clothes Draco had worn the day before and wear them? Didn't Harry ever wonder why his clothes were slightly wrinkled and smelling of Draco? Unless, that was what he wanted… But how could a person do that without being aware of it?

The touches were worse though. The way Harry's hand would slide across Draco's own, seemingly by accident, warm palm ghosting across tingling skin, the sensation so light and teasing it made Draco want to scream. There was the way Harry would shift on the couch when they were watching television, his body never actually touching Draco's, but near enough that Harry's warmth leeched into Draco's suddenly cold body. And there was that time that Harry had brushed Draco's hair out of his eyes, pushing it behind Draco's ear, so gently, that it made Draco want to close his eyes and live forever in that one moment. But the touches were all so fleeting, and so casual that they could be accidental. Draco fervently hoped they weren't.

This morning had been the worst of all, however, and was the reason for Draco's current twitchy and irritated behaviour. He had been preparing breakfast as usual, leaning over a pan containing

several chocolate chip pancakes (a rather plebeian recipe, Draco thought, but Harry seemed to like anything that contained chocolate), when a dozy looking Harry had yawned his way into the kitchen. Having figured out Harry's daily routine without too much difficulty (Harry really was too predictable), he knew the dark-haired man would head directly to the coffee pot. There wasn't a lot of room in the small kitchen, and Harry had to move past him to reach the machine. Still, there had been no real need for Harry to put his hands on Draco's hips as he slid past. For a split second, Harry's entire body had brushed up against his back, the heat of Harry's hands burning into Draco's hips, the infinitesimal amount of breath against the back of his neck enough to scorch him. The spatula had fallen from suddenly nerveless fingers, along with the sound of a sharp intake of air, unbidden from Draco's mouth. And Harry had had the gall to ask if anything was the matter.

" Yes, Harry, something is the matter. You've been playing with my emotions all week, promising things and never once coming through on them. There ought to be more kissing, if you ask me. I may be new at all this, but I definitely feel that there has been a severe lack of kissing," Draco mused aloud to the emptiness. He laughed at himself, then scowled, then grinned madly, before returning to his earlier growling. Harry Potter was driving him insane, and there was nothing he could do to stop him.

It was the Friday afternoon before their planned evening out, when they finally had a chance to go out to the stores. Draco was waiting more or less patiently at the flat for Harry to get back from his morning class and collect him. He was dressed in a warm coat and his scruffy shoes, the red mittens once again adorning his hands. It wasn't very cold, but he couldn't seem to go without the mittens. Harry arrived, and Draco took a deep breath and stepped outside the flat door.

" You okay?"

" I'm fine," Draco spit out angrily. " Don't keep reminding me of it, okay? Let me deal with it."

Harry kept himself from responding defensively, and instead said neutrally, " We have to go to the bookshop first. Get my paycheque again."

They arrived at the bookshop, which was quiet, with only Mr and Mrs. Cooper in the store. Mr. Cooper was a short, slightly balding man with glasses, who had a smile almost as wide as his wife's.

" Harry, my boy. So good to see you out and about on this fine afternoon, and this must be Draco, your new 'friend', whom the missus keeps talking about. Nice to meet you, son. I'm Mr. Cooper, but everyone calls me Coop, you'll do the same, yes?"

" Nobody calls him Coop, he just thinks it would make a good nick-name," Mrs. Cooper said cheerily. Mr. Cooper tried to scowl at his wife, but he was too obviously smitten with his wife, for it to have any affect.

" I've your money right here, Harry. See? I can occasionally be organized," she said. " How are things with you Draco? Harry's been taking better care of you then last time, I hope?"

Draco smiled, " Oh yes. We're going out tomorrow night, actually, and I told Harry that he simply had to get some new clothes."

" Congratulations! I've been trying to drag my husband out to the shops, but he adamantly refuses."

" What's wrong with what I wear?" Mr. Cooper interjected.

" Men," Mrs. Cooper said, shaking her head. Draco cast her a sympathetic look, while Harry rolled his eyes.

" Would you like to come with us, Mrs. Cooper? Draco needs some clothes too, and since he obviously can't rely on my opinion…" Harry asked, relishing the fact that Draco was glaring at him. Harry knew that if Mrs. Cooper came along, Draco would have to keep up his persona the whole time, or he would spoil the joke.

" Oooh, I would love to! I'll get my coat, if that's okay with you sweetheart?"

" Go ahead. Heaven forbid I should stand between you and a shopping excursion," Mr. Cooper said. He turned to Harry and winked, " You will send her home in a few days time, once the expedition is over?"

" We'll try," said Draco. He walked up to Mrs. Cooper, and offered his arm to her charmingly. " But you never know with me. Once I start spending money, it's hard for me to stop," Draco narrowed his eyes at Harry, and Harry gulped. He knew what that look meant; it meant Harry was going to have to spend quite a bit of money to keep Draco quiet. Well, it was to be expected that Draco would find some way to work things to his advantage. Harry would have been more upset, except that Draco, for the first time since leaving the flat, actually looked relaxed. Harry decided to smile, and just go along with things.

Mrs. Cooper knew her way around the shops better then either of the men, so she took the lead, dragging Draco with her by the arm, with Harry following in their wake.

" Nope, don't like the look of that. The cut is all wrong," Draco said. He was seated in a stiff-backed chair just outside the men's dressing room. Mrs. Cooper sat in the chair next to him. They were surrounded by several shopping bags, most of them Draco's.

" I agree. I think he should try the black pants in a smaller size. I don't know why he keeps reaching for clothes that are obviously too big for him," Mrs. Cooper said. Harry had long since given-up trying to get them to listen to his opinion. They both ignored him anyway.

" Here they are," Draco said, finding the pants and handing them to Harry. Harry changed

quickly and came out again, trying to remain unaffected by their combined scrutiny.

" Still not quite right. Perhaps we ought to try the next shop, I think I saw some items in there last week that would be perfect for him," Mrs. Cooper said eagerly. Draco nodded, and Harry sighed and went to change back into his regular clothes. As they walked towards what had to be their thousandth shop of the day (actually, it was probably about the twelfth store they had been to, but Harry thought the exaggeration was necessary), Harry took one last shot at ending the trip early. Somehow, he had gotten the responsibility of carrying all the bags; a most opportune cough from Draco had freed him from helping.

" Why do we have to keep looking? I've found some stuff, and Draco was really the one without anything to wear. And speaking of that, how come Draco found everything he needed so quickly?"

" Because, darling, some people have an immediate understanding of what will look good on them," Mrs. Cooper said, smiling. " When you have to let other people help, it takes a little longer, but don't worry. We haven't yet begun to fight… er, shop."

" So Draco was faster because he has good taste to begin with?" Harry asked dejectedly. There was no way he could make the trip go faster then, since he readily admitted to having little to no fashion sense.

" Well there's that," Draco said. " Plus there's the fact that I look good in everything."

Mrs. Cooper giggled, and Harry rolled his eyes skyward yet again. Harry supposed it was a good thing that his companions were having such a good time, and it had been awhile since Draco had had a panic attack. Still, they were so perky (due to Mrs. Cooper's regular personality, and Draco's role as the over-the-top boyfriend), that it was beginning to get on Harry's nerves.

The next store proved sympathetic to Harry's plight, for virtually everything he tried on not only fit well, but they met with the near impossible standards of his two critics. He could have done without the lascivious comments and blatant innuendoes from Draco, but Mrs. Cooper only encouraged him, laughing until she had tears in her eyes at some of the more explicit descriptions.

After purchasing the clothing, Mrs. Cooper suggested that both Harry and Draco get haircuts. She directed them to a specific salon, suggesting with exaggerated movements of her eyebrows that Harry keep an eye on his boyfriend. This proved to be because one of the stylists was very obviously gay, and very obviously partial to blonds.

Harry had his hair trimmed rather quickly, while Draco was subjected to a lengthy discussion on the 'amazing quality and texture' of his hair. Draco was more then a little discomfited by the not-so-subtle attentions of Alfredo, his stylist. When the silver scissors finally made their appearance, Draco shut his eyes and hoped for the best.

" Looks good, love," said Harry, loud and clear. Draco's eyes opened wide when he felt soft lips descend on his cheek.

" Thanks," Draco stuttered, wondering when he had fallen asleep and started dreaming. Looking up he caught sight of Alfredo in the mirror. Alfredo was pouting, Mrs. Cooper patting him on the shoulder, and Harry leaned in again and whispered into Draco's ear.

" Alfredo wasn't entirely convinced we were together. I'm assuming, of course, that you're not interested in a date with wonder boy?"

" Not hardly," Draco said grinning. " You know, having you as a boyfriend sure has its advantages."

Harry reddened slightly, and turned away, leaving Draco to sigh discontentedly. It seemed like whenever an opportunity arose for something to happen between them, Harry backed-off. It made no sense, since Draco was all but convinced that Harry wanted there to be a connection. So, what was Harry so afraid of? And how was Draco going to make him change his mind?

After the haircuts, Draco and Harry walked Mrs. Cooper back to the bookshop, and went back to the flat with their purchases. Draco was hanging up his clothes in the closet in the bedroom, when he came across the cloak he had been wearing when he had first arrived. It seemed like that had been ages ago. He shivered as unwanted memories came to mind, and he shoved the cloak to the darkest corner of the closet. He proceeded to hang up Harry's clothes, and when he was finished, he stood back to admire his handiwork. It pleased him to see the neat orderly row, with his things hanging alongside Harry's, like they were meant to be there.

Harry worked most of Saturday, but he was home in time for dinner. After eating, Harry took a short nap on the couch, while Draco finished his latest book from the comfort of the armchair. At least, the original plan had been to read, but of course, his traitorous mind was making him cast longing looks at the slumbering man across from him. Damn it if the man wasn't fascinating even while comatose. Harry was frowning slightly, a slight twitching in his limbs becoming apparent. Before it could worsen, Draco shook him awake.

" Thought you wanted to take a shower before your friends got here," Draco said. Harry rubbed at his eyes and stretched.

" Yeah, thanks I will," said Harry. Harry's outfit was laid out for him – Draco was not taking any chances with Harry's attire, despite the fact that all the clothes Mrs. Cooper and he had chosen couldn't possibly clash. Knowing Harry, the man would probably find a way. Harry took the change of clothes with him into the bathroom, and Draco decided he might as well change too, while he had the bedroom to himself.

Draco was standing before the mirror, fixing his already perfect hair. He had to say one thing for Alfredo – the man sure knew how to cut hair. He must have been gazing at his reflection longer then intended, because he was still standing there when Harry came in, ready to go.

Draco could see Harry's reflection in the mirror, so he didn't need to turn around. Black cloth trousers skimmed over long slim legs; a green fitted t-shirt, so dark it was almost black, emphasized lightly muscled arms, a toned chest, and sweetly defined abs. Harry's softly curled, dark hair shadowed his pale face, making his green eyes even more startling for their luminosity. Unlike other times when Draco had seen Harry without his glasses, this time Harry's eyes were not clouded and hazily focused, but were sharp and piercing, and seemed to bore into Draco, even through the mirror.

Harry responded to Draco's unasked question, " I'm wearing contact lenses. I don't like to wear them much, they make me feel… exposed, or something. But I thought they'd work better for tonight."

Draco could understand Harry's motivation; with the contacts in, Harry's face was uncommonly open, vulnerable even. The green eyes flashed, despite the dull light, the raw emotionality of the emerald orbs easy to read. It was Harry's face, that when combined with the new clothes over the nicely developed body, made him, in this moment, look almost impossibly beautiful. Draco suppressed a groan, and instead muttered something under his breath.

" What was that?" Harry asked. He clearly was looking for some approval, so Draco summoned up his courage, and turned, facing the real person. Harry looked even better then his reflection.

" I said, you weren't supposed to look that good," Draco said, annoyed that he wasn't in better control of this situation.

" Well, sorry," Harry said sarcastically.

" You should be," Draco said, turning back to the safety of the mirror.

" And why exactly don't you want me to look good again?"

If Draco hadn't been so worried about ruining his hair, he would have beaten his head against the wall. He wanted to tell Harry that he was supposed to look his plain, ordinary self, because at least then Draco had some chance of keeping his pulse rate normal. He wanted to shake Harry until the other boy realized that if he went out looking the way he did, that heads all over the place were going to turn. He wanted to lunge at Harry, wrap his hands around Harry's neck, and strangle him, because Harry was once more taunting him, teasing him, and making him ache with want. How could Harry be so blind?

Harry was shifting his weight from foot to foot. Without his hair hanging in his eyes, without his glasses, and baggy clothes, he felt more then a little insecure. Being unable to decipher Draco's mood wasn't helping his confidence any either. Speaking of Draco, did he have to always look so calm and put together?

Draco was dressed in grey nylon pants, the drawstring waistband riding low on his slim hips – whether that was by design or because he was still a little on the thin side was anybody's guess,

but Harry surmised that the blond knew exactly what he was doing. A long sleeved shirt, the colour of wet slate, and almost metallic in texture, was draped over his finely boned frame, the hint of collarbone at the shirt's neck surprisingly alluring. Like everything else about Draco, from his poised carriage, to the smooth curve of his neck, to the radiant quality of his unblemished skin, and to his shifting silver eyes, the affect was as subtle as it was devastating. Harry felt his mouth go dry.

Harry watched with rapt attention as Draco detached himself from the mirror, and approached, the graceful movement of his limbs enabling him to glide rather then walk. Harry was aware that he had stopped breathing at some point, but it didn't seem all that important at the moment. Draco reached out, his eyes focussed entirely on Harry, and Harry's eyes widened. Draco brushed a non-existent speck from Harry's shoulder.

" Lint," Draco breathed.

" Oh," Harry responded stupidly.

Just then the door buzzer sounded, startling them both. Harry leapt away from Draco, and hurried to the intercom. He pushed a button and told his friends they'd be right down. When he returned to the bedroom, Draco had already put his coat and shoes on, and was holding out Harry's jacket.

" Right, then, I guess we're ready?"

" Some more then others," Draco muttered.

Standing just outside the front doors of the flat were Harry's friends. Tim was leaning against the back of a rusting red car; a rather large man with blunt features and a solemn expression, he looked up with mild interest as Harry and Draco approached. Mike, in direct contrast to Tim, was small, lively, and sprinted up the few steps to all but tackle Harry.

" Harry! Tell me you like the hair. See, 'cause I spiked it, then Tim said it looked goofy, so I wet it down, and then I remembered that I never listen to that prat, so I spiked it again, and then even I thought it was overdone, so I went to take it out but Tim said we had to go or we'd be late…"

Harry interrupted. The only way to get a word in edgewise with Mike was simply to break in mid-spiel. " Well, let me get a closer look." Harry held a hand up to his chin, and circled around Mike looking very ponderous. Unable to bear the pout in Mike's brown eyes, he finished his mock examination. " Looks stunning, Tim doesn't know what he's talking about."

Mike turned triumphantly and called out to Tim, " See? I told you he'd like it."

" Bloody fantastic. Think you could introduce us now Harry?"

" Right, sorry," Harry said, as they moved towards the car. " This is Draco, and Draco, these are my friends, Tim and Mike."

" Nice to meet you," Draco said carefully, unconsciously moving closer to Harry.

" I'm guessing you're the reason Harry's looking so very delectable tonight," Mike said. This was exactly the reaction Draco had feared, and he felt very tempted to take hold of HaHarry's hand and show that he was spoken for. Unfortunately, Harry wasn't his – yet.

Tim rolled his eyes, " Great, now you're coming on to our friends too. Have you no shame?"

" None, apparently. I'm still dating you, aren't I?" Mike said cheekily.

" Hey, I made you lads swear to be on your best behaviour, so as not to scare Draco overly. Now, are we going or what? It's damn well freezing out here," Harry said.

" Ah, Harry. Ever the voice of reason. I do hope you're more interesting Draco," Mike said. Harry just shook his head in amusement.

They piled into the car, and most of the conversation was taken up with getting themselves to the club without getting lost on the dark, and twisting streets. Draco decided he didn't really like travelling in cars, screwing his eyes tightly shut after spinning around a corner at high speed, and was doubly glad to get out when they arrived at their destination.

" This is one of our favourite places," Mike supplied, as they waited outside the entrance for Tim to park the car. " Near enough to university to get a few students, lots of people, reasonable prices, loud and cheery music, and a 'friendly' atmosphere."

" Friendly?" Draco queried.

" He means he won't get beat-up for kissing his boyfriend here," Harry supplied.

Tim arrived, and they pushed through the throng into the darkened club. Swirling lights hung from the bare rafters, and a fog machine was pumping out smoke at regular intervals, to mingle with the already stifling air, and everywhere Draco looked, they're were more people. Panic filled him, as the muted and hazy objects in the gloom began to take-on sinister shapes. It was the people pressing against him, however, that really sent his confidence plummeting, and when he felt a hand close around his arm, he struggled against it, giving out a small cry that was thankfully swallowed up by the pounding music.

" I've got you, it's okay. Sorry, I didn't think," Harry said, worried and concerned. Draco just shook his head, dismissing the need for an apology.

" Just a lot of people and noise so quickly. I'll be alright," Draco said. Harry's hand pressed gently against the small of Draco's back as he guided the blond forward again, to the table that

Tim had procured. Mike took their coats to the coat check, and Draco gratefully took the corner seat. Harry still looked worried, and Draco forced himself to smile. " Look, we're here to have a good time. Let's just get me very, very, drunk, deal?"

" If you're sure…"

" Harry, the man said he wants to get drunk. It's our job to see that he succeeds," Mike said, catching the tail end of their conversation, when he returned with drinks from the bar. " Drink-up, it's still happy hour for another fifteen minutes. Then it should begin to pick up in here."

Draco blanched at the prospect of still more people crowding the small space, but he was also determined to prove he could not be easily cowed. He latched onto his beer like it was the answer to all of life's problems, and, actually, for that night, it was.

Draco was giggling madly at another one of Mike's incredibly rude, incredibly tasteless, and therefore terribly funny jokes. Tim was tracing patterns on the tabletop between the numerous glasses and bottles that littered the surface, while he watched his boyfriend with a look that was part bemusement and part adoration. Harry was smiling gently, his eyes lidded softly; he was pleased with the way the night was going. His friends were getting along, Draco had reached the happy-drunk stage where inhibitions and insecurities were deemed unimportant, and the music was finally starting to get good. It also helped that he was more then a little inebriated himself.

" Draco dance now," Mike said, standing up suddenly and nearly knocking the table over. Harry broke out of his lethargy, to protest on Draco's behalf, but Draco beat him to it.

" No thanks, unless… Harry? Do you want to?"

To his surprise, all three men at the table burst out laughing. Mike was all but rolling on the floor, clutching his stomach. When he had sufficiently recovered, he blurted out,

" You want Harry to dance? Do you have masochist leanings or something?"

" Oh come on, I admit I'm not great, but I'm not that bad," Harry disputed. Mike started laughing again, and Tim raised an eyebrow. " Am I?"

" Yes, you are. And as you're friends we can't allow you to be so humiliated – well, at least not when we'd be associated with said humiliation," Tim said. It was the longest sentence Tim had made that night. Maybe because he was the only one still sober.

" Come on, Draco. Let's leave these two flatfeet here, where they can watch and be envious. Please?" Mike was really whining now, and to Harry's astonishment, Draco was capitulating. Clearly the blond was even drunker then Harry thought.

Draco was thinking that maybe if Harry drank just a little more, then it might be possible to manipulate him into dancing with him. And if he could get Harry to commit to such an action in public, it would be a big step for them in the right direction. It was the plan Draco had come up with sometime that evening, after he'd become a little more at ease in their environment. It was quite a crafty plan, which Draco was immensely pleased with, mostly because it involved being devious, clever, and deceitful. Imagine, they actually thought he was intoxicated. A smirk darted across his face.

" Fine, Mike. Only if Tim doesn't mind?"

" Go, have fun," Tim said, clearly relieved not to have to step out onto the dance floor himself. Harry stood up to allow Draco to move past him, and decided to get himself another drink. When he got back to the table, Tim was staring with rapt attention at the dancers, in particular at Mike and Draco. He wasn't the only one, and it wasn't simply because it was two men that the sight was so arresting.

" And that is why we do not let you dance," Tim muttered, and Harry silently agreed. Draco's movements would have made any feeble attempt by Harry look grotesque in comparison. The dance flowed so naturally, as though Draco was meant to be watched. Maybe he was, for Harry certainly couldn't seem to keep his eyes off him. It was all silver and shadow, seductive and sensuous. Harry wanted to close his eyes, the sensations to overwhelming, but his body betrayed him, unwilling to be deprived from its new source of energy, the revitalizing aphrodisiac of the soul.

A slow song commenced, and Mike and Draco returned to the table.

" Drunk enough yet to risk it Harry?" Draco asked. Harry was resisting, his mind supplying him with a thousand excuses. He was tempted to tell Draco that, no matter how good Draco and Mike had looked together, that men really shouldn't dance, and especially not together. And it was a slow song, and people were now interested in Draco, and if they went out together they'd both be watched, and they'd have to be quite close together…

" Okay," Harry said. The instant the words spilled out of his mouth he regretted them, but by then it was too late. Draco was pulling him forwards by the hand, in a manner reminiscent of how they had entered the club, though this time the roles were reversed. It was Draco who was guiding Harry; Draco who was making the people watching seem inconsequential.

Clearly, Draco was recalling the same moment, for when they were in position beneath the softly glowing multi-coloured lights, Draco echoed Harry's words from before: " It's okay, I've got you."

Harry stood, looking awkward, eyes alighting on the press of people around them, feeling very conspicuous.

" For crying out loud, Potter. This is not a death march. Look, you put your hands here, and let

me do the rest," Draco said, exasperated, though charmed, by Harry's reluctance. Draco placed Harry's hands on his hips, and slid his own arms up Harry's shoulders. Harry was unbending, shuffling his feet, and still looking around anxiously. Draco sighed.

" Just relax, Harry. It's okay, everything's okay."

Draco brought Harry in closer, until they could feel the heat of each other's bodies.

" Close your eyes, Harry," Draco murmured, and Harry obeyed. Very slowly, Draco brought Harry's head down so it rested against his shoulder. The tension in Harry's body began to lessen, the corded muscle of his neck and shoulders seeming to melt beneath Draco's fingers. Draco continued to stroke Harry's back, feeling his way along his spine, and then up to the nape where he gently fingered soft strands of dark hair.

Draco felt it. That moment where Harry surrendered all control, all thought, and gave himself over entirely into Draco's protection. It stunned him for a moment: the tenderness of feeling when Harry turned his head and nuzzled gently under Draco's chin, and the way Harry's body became a heavy, warm weight, pressing against Draco in utter abandon. Draco's hold instinctively tightened. They were now closely enjoined, their legs intertwined, and somehow the music was unimportant, the crowd nonexistent. When Harry sighed, Draco felt it rush over his skin, and it made him gasp. He would have liked to shut his eyes, the way Harry's were, and savour every touch, but he felt responsible for Harry's condition. His grip grew fiercer with every look that someone threw at them, whether it was a look of appreciation, or unsettlement, because for once, he was the protector. Was this what Harry needed the most? Someone to take care of him for a change? Because, at this moment, Draco felt that he could do that; what was more, he wanted to be the person Harry leaned on. It was that strange paradox of giving strength, and becoming stronger for it.

" You know how we were saying that Draco was pretty arrogant to ignore our advice about dancing with Harry?" Tim asked Mike. Mike was all but falling asleep in his chair, leaning heavily against Tim who had wrapped a strong arm across the smaller man's shoulders.

" Yeah," Mike responded.

" Remember how we said that he was going to regret being on the dance floor with the Klutz-King?"

" Right," Mike said, yawning widely.

" I think we owe him an apology," Tim said, gesturing. Mike looked up and despite his sleepiness he sat up straight and gaped.

" Harry is dancing," Mike observed. " Well."

" You know what I'm thinking now Mike?"

" Illuminate me."

" I think Harry's finally met his match. Draco's gotten this far, he might just be able to go the whole way."

" Our little Harry actually looks happy," Mike said, snuggling back up to Tim, eyes shining brightly as he looked with fondness at the oblivious couple. " It's great, isn't it?"

" Let's hope Harry doesn't find a way of screwing it up."

The music stopped, then started again, but the couple in the middle of it all, ignored it. Harry adjusted his hold around Draco's waist, nudging his shirt up slightly by accident in the process. Harry's fingers rested tranquilly on the exposed skin, making Draco feel like he was being slowly burned from the outside in. His heart rate increased, and a flush stole over his cheeks. His own fingers found their way deeper into Harry's hair, revelling in the contrast between the cool strands of silk, and the warm curve of Harry's head. Draco thought he heard Harry whimper, and he began whispering and humming nonsense sounds in Harry's ear. When Harry shuddered he just squeezed him tighter. It was a dance like no other; one that had nothing to do with steps, but everything to do with anticipating what was needed. Right now, Draco needed someone to focus his attention on and Harry… Harry needed to know it was okay just to be held.

Next Chapter: Dudley, and punches, and kisses, oh my. Review? Feel free to threaten me - I need the motivation!

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Chapter: 6

Confession? Author is terrified she won't live up to the praise you so lovingly bestowed on her. She's also more then a little afraid at some of the threats she received – shootings, beheadings, suicides, and, worst of all, sending Mrs. Weasley after her *shudder*. Seriously, though? Thanks so much. I was flabbergasted (ain't that a great word?) Nothing else to report, except that I got Slytherin socks! Yes, you heard me, socks with a picture of a snake, Slytherin written across the top, and 'Harry Potter' written out in rubber along the bottom (typical, Slytherin walking all over those Gryffindors!) Too bad they keep me from sliding on the linoleum (that'll make sense later). Hope you enjoy!

The underlying rhythm of the music had been in perfect sync with the beat of Draco's heart, when he and Harry had begun to dance. Somewhere along the way, however, the tempo had altered so that now his heart was racing at far greater speed then the music could ever hope to achieve. Intensity such as he had never known made him tremble, and he clutched Harry closer,

though they were already pressed so tightly together that he could feel every breath in and out of Harry's lungs.

Draco wet his lips. In his mind, he had created a multitude of scenarios for his first kiss with Harry. He saw them on a beach, the salt-sea air wafting over from gently breaking waves, the sun bathing them in light and heat, the sand warm and faintly gritty beneath their palms and the soles of their feet. He saw Harry grin happily, and saw himself leaning in to capture that fleeting smile with his mouth.

Draco drew his head back, cheek dragging against the slightly rough skin of Harry's freshly shaven face. He pictured them in another whimsical situation. They sat side-by-side on an ancient stone bench in the coolness of very early morning, heavy dew bringing out the scents of fresh cut grass and heady flowers. Soft grey fog drifted over the lush green foliage, and swirled around their feet, only to dissipate beneath the first pinkish rays of the rising sun. Harry's eyes were solemn, a moss green that melded with the landscape, and Draco couldn't be certain he was real, and not some trick of the light and shadow. The kiss was as gentle as the mist that enveloped them.

Draco put a little more force behind his lead, angling them across the writhing dance floor, to a corner lost in shadow. He pictured another idyllic first kiss. They were walking down an empty street in the faded light of evening. A soft rain began to fall, dampening their clothes, their hair, their skin, and making everything seem new and glossy. The streetlights came on, their smooth muted light flowing through the inky darkness, and bouncing off water covered streets, making them sparkle as though covered in hundreds of polished gems. Draco reached up and removed Harry's misted over glasses, and looked into eyes that had somehow caught the glow of gold as it spilled out from above, the sight so dazzling he was momentarily blinded. When they came together for a kiss, the contrast between cool rainwater and hot mouths made the rest of his senses shutdown.

Draco's breath was coming in short pants now, as he tried desperately to calm down, to not rush things too much. It was like the other vague ideas he had about kissing Harry, the schemes that weren't so elaborately planned out, where there was simply passion pouring forth like molten lava, and a kiss that burned truer and hotter then any flame.

He had to kiss Harry now. In all his fantasies, they had always been alone, and always someplace special. Unfortunately, all those plans needed time, and time was something he was rapidly running out of. He had to kiss Harry. He would simply have to make do with the current setting – a loud club with boisterous people crowding around, much as he would have liked something perfect, something surreal, and completely and utterly unforgettable. He had to kiss Harry. He needed to kiss Harry or something integral to his very being would be lost. He had to kiss Harry. And that was why they were in the most private corner that the club could afford them, and why Draco was nudging Harry's head from off his shoulder, and cupping Harry's chin with his long fingers. Because he had to kiss Harry.

Harry's eyes opened, focussed themselves on Draco's intense expression, and widened slightly

as Draco stroked a pale finger across his lips.

" Draco?" Harry whispered, confusion and want vying for prominence in his green eyes.

Draco couldn't formulate an answer; he was too far along now, too close to his goal. His heart was fluttering so fast that he feared that at any moment it was going to come apart, and with his lips just barely distanced from Harry's, he couldn't draw one more single shaky breath to steady it. Harry's eyes were drifting closed again, leaning into Draco's touch, patient and willing. Time froze.

" Well, well, well. If it isn't my dear cousin," came a loud, nasal voice. The moment shattered, and Harry pulled away. To Draco it felt like the whole world had been stolen from him, once Harry was removed from his grasp. He whirled and glared at the man who had dared interrupt.

Whatever familiar resemblance might have existed between Harry and his cousin, it was lost beneath layers of soft muscle and fat. Though he stood at an impressive height, his sheer bulk made him appear more round, then tall, and his puffed red face with its frowning expression, only heightened the illusion of a small, whiny child stuck in a giant's body. Lank brown hair stuck to his head like a helmet, and beady little eyes squinted at them.

" Dudley," Harry hissed lowly, crossing his arms across his chest protectively. Only because Draco was well versed in studying Harry, did he catch the slight quaver of apprehension in Harry's voice. " What are you doing here?"

" Why, I feel I should be the one asking that question. Since this is my territory… Don't you freaks prefer a different domain? Oh, that's right, you even failed at becoming a freak, didn't you? And that means there's nothing you can do to me."

Harry scowled but said nothing, hoping Dudley would get bored and disappear. Dudley seemed to have run out of taunts already, when his greedy gaze alighted on Draco. Draco refused to be intimidated; innate stubborn pride made him stand his ground.

Dudley's eyes lit up as though someone had handed him a free chocolate cake, " And you're with someone. A boy. Ha! You're not only a freak, but a faggot as well! Oh, mum and dad will just love this news. A fucking fag… Can't you ever do anything normal?"

Draco wasn't entirely sure where the hostility between the two cousins stemmed from, and he didn't even really understand what was happening right at that moment. What he did know for certain was that Harry was being threatened, and that he was scared. As Harry's new, self-appointed protector, it only seemed right for Draco to step between Harry and the behemoth.

" Listen you fat, disgusting, ignoramus. I suggest you leave, because I did become a fully certified 'freak', and I know a curse that will shrink that pathetic little thing between your legs, to nothing at all."

Dudley's gaze flickered down to his crotch as he surreptitiously tried to shield the area with his blunt, meaty hands. He was unaccustomed to his victims fighting back and he could feel his bravado crumbling fast. However, he also knew Draco couldn't really attack him magically in a public place. Hatred rose up in his throat like bile. How dare this blond pansy speak back to him as though they were equals! With spittle flying from his mouth, he retorted intelligently with,

" Oh yeah?"

" Yeah," Draco said. Draco's cool regard contrasted sharply with Dudley's mounting temper. " Now you just toddle off to whatever little cess-pool you oozed from, and let Harry and I get back to what we were doing. Or, you can watch if you like, seeing how hot and bothered it's gotten you so far. You do know what they say about homophobes like you, right? That they're really just in denial?"

Draco figured it was that last comment about Dudley's sexuality that sealed his fate. The punch was unprofessionally delivered, but what it lacked in technique, it made up for in brute strength. The fist struck with the force of a hammer against the side of Draco's face, and sent him careening to the floor. His nose began to bleed on contact. He supposed, cynically, that he ought to thank his father for teaching him how to take a punch – Dudley would have broken his jaw otherwise.

" Hey, I warned you earlier! No rough stuff or you're out of here," said a burly bouncer, breaking through the small crowd that had begun to form around them. The bouncer placed a steely grip around Dudley's forearm. Dudley tried to feign innocence, but with Draco still on the floor, blood seeping into the sleeve of his shirt, it was not a terribly credible act. " Out, now. Unless anyone wants to press charges?"

Draco didn't know what that meant, and looked to Harry. Harry was staring at his shoes, and managed to shake his head no. The bouncer grunted and began hauling the protesting Dudley out of the club. A manager showed up, and began handing out free drink coupons, dispelling the crowd and getting people back into the regular stream of things.

" Shit, Harry. Somebody should put a muzzle on that muggle," Draco said. He was still sitting on the dusty floor, waiting for the room to stop spinning before attempting to stand.

" What the fuck did you think you were doing?" Harry screamed at him. Furious, Harry glared down at Draco, snapping out, " You just had to open your big mouth didn't you? Now Dudley knows."

Stunned, Draco could only watch stupidly as Harry stalked off. What the hell had just happened? One minute, everything was perfect, and the next, Draco was in pain, hated by friend and foe alike. Trying to work out the problem for himself, he ran through the list of events: One: Draco tries to kiss Harry. Two: the world's ugliest person interrupts Draco and Harry at the crucial juncture. Three: said ugly person threatens Harry. Four: gallant and gorgeous Draco politely

informs the ugly person that he has a small penis. Five: Draco gets slugged (but still looks far better then the man who hit him). Six: Draco gets yelled at by the object of his affections for intervening.

Draco shook his head, wincing when he remembered he had just been hit and that shaking his head was not the smartest thing to be doing, still completely in the dark about Harry's reactions.

" Well screw him," Draco muttered, starting to get angry. " See if I ever do something nice for him again."

" Here," said Tim, fighting his way through the milling masses, and handing Draco a wad of paper napkins. Draco took the offered items gratefully, pressing them to his bloody nose. " Come on, let's get you cleaned up a bit."

Tim led Draco through the crowd to the men's room, and leaned against the wall, while Draco stood in front of the sink, washing dried blood from his nose and chin, and spitting out the residue that had filtered into his mouth. Draco was still muttering obscenities about Harry's lack of gratitude, when Tim broke in.

" Sorry you got hit. We didn't notice Dudley had showed up until it was over."

" It's okay, not your fault."

" It's not Harry's either," Tim said.

Draco sighed," I know it's not."

" But it still hurts that he shoved you away at the last moment, right?"

" You could say that," Draco said, eyeing his appearance critically. The shirt was ruined, and it looked as though his eye was going to swell up. His face was already turning an interesting shade of purple. The pain that he felt, however, was far from physical. The bruise was a minor discomfort; the fact that Harry had turned on him like that was the real source of grief.

" He does that, the avoidance thing I mean, usually without meaning to. Try not to take it personally," Tim advised.

" How do you know?"

" We used to date. Very briefly, I might add. This would have been nearly a year ago. Anyway, I always considered Harry to be just my type, so I asked him out, and he accepted. Two dates in, I knew it wasn't going to work. He wasn't really ready, you understand?"

" I'm afraid I don't," Draco said, still bitter.

Tim grunted, " Harry has some pretty warped ideas about what's right and what's wrong. I sort-of figured he must have had really strict parents, and that he was trying to live up to some impossible standard."

" It wasn't his parents, but go on," Draco said.

" Well, I don't think he has really accepted that he's gay. Oh, he says he is, and most of him believes it, but there's still this part of him that won't accept it, a part telling him that to be gay is wrong."

" Don't think I'm being rude, but how does that apply to what just happened?"

" His only remaining family didn't know his preference, and now they do. It was one more chink in his protective shell of denial."

" Is it me?" Draco asked finally, afraid to hear the truth, but needing to know regardless.

" Why you're not together? Yes and no. He likes you, any idiot can see that, but that means you're a serious threat to his way of life. He's likely terrified, which I think is why he yelled at you."

" Well, it's bloody frustrating – no pun intended," Draco said, finished with the repairs to his face.

" Draco, I know we just met, but don't give up on him? He's a good man, really," Tim said. Draco didn't answer at first, but eventually he gave a small nod of acquiescence. " Of course, I'd hold out for a damn good apology, the stupid git."

The comment made Draco smile, but it faded quickly. All of it was too much to take-in, and more then anything, he just wanted to go home. Go home, and ignore Harry until he had sorted things out properly in his head.

With Tim off helping Draco, it was Mike's responsibility to look after Harry. He found Harry back at their table, scowling into an empty glass and kicking the table leg, which was beginning to shake ominously.

" So…" Mike began, already stumped for something to say. Tim was the one who usually handled all this sensitive, emotional crap. Best to stick with what you know, Mike decided. " So, you fucked him yet?"

Harry's eyes nearly fell out of his head, " What?"

" Draco; have you shagged him yet?"

" No, I… No, I told you before, we're just friends."

" Bullshit. You do not dance with friends the way you two were dancing."

" I didn't want to, that was all Draco's doing," Harry muttered.

" Uh huh. Sure, I believe that," Mike said, rolling his eyes. " Everyone could see how desperate you were to get away from him, what with your arms wrapped around him and all. And the fact that most of us onlookers were getting the best foreplay of our lives just watching you two, that wouldn't in any way make you believe that you're both craving something more?"

" People were watching?"

" Are you kidding? You robbed us all of a climax, when that idiot of a cousin interrupted. You're into him, and you want to fuck him senseless, and it's all as plain as day. Not that I blame you, he's Goddamn gorgeous, though he's a bit on the thin side, and I generally like my men to be big and a little bit musclely, but not too many muscles, and it's okay if their thing is a little bent…"

" Mike! I get it."

" Then quit with the denial, it's getting boring, and admit that you get hard just thinking about him."

Eventually Harry said, " Okay. Maybe, I'll admit that I like him in a less-then platonic way." In response to his confession, he got a whack upside the head, and a foot to the shin. " Ouch! What the hell was that for?"

" For being such an inconsiderate bastard. Here he is, the man you willingly admit to at least 'liking', doing his best to make you happy and keep you safe, and how do you repay him? You kick him while he's down! I'd hit you more if I didn't know that you did it because you're so messed up in the head. You owe him a serious apology, and I suggest grovelling on your knees and begging for forgiveness."

Harry paled. It had been pretty stupid, yelling at Draco like that. Why had he done it? Did it really matter that Dudley, and eventually his Aunt and Uncle, found out that he was homosexual? Surely he didn't still need their approval? Something had simply snapped inside when he'd seen the disgust in Dudley's eyes. And then the rage had taken the form of words, and come spilling out of his mouth before he'd really thought about it, not directed so much at Draco, but to anyone who cared to listen. God: how he regretted it now.

" You're right, where is he?"

" Cleaning off the blood, I suspect. Now, I know you're new at this, so I just thought I'd mention that there's an ulterior motive for being on your knees while apologizing. If it starts to look like he isn't going to forgive you, then being on your knees puts you nice and level with certain

items, and let's just say there are some things your mouth can do, that words can't."

Harry's head thumped against the tabletop, his face a vivid crimson in colour.

" Mike? Not now? Please?"

" Yeah, okay. I'll give you pointers next time. Besides, I see Tim, and he's got our coats. I think it's time we were going. You getting a ride back with us?"

" Nah, it's out of your way; Draco and I will take the underground. I guess we need to talk anyway," Harry said.

" Well, talk to begin with…"

" Mike!"

" Right, sorry."

Harry was still blushing madly when they joined up with Draco and Tim. He couldn't make himself look Draco in the eye as he shrugged into his jacket and hurried out the main door. Just outside the entrance, they split up, Mike winking, Tim clapping Draco on the shoulder sympathetically, and Draco and Harry standing with as much distance between themselves as possible. When Tim and Mike were gone, Harry reluctantly found his voice.

" Draco I'm…"

" Where's the underground from here?" Draco interposed coolly. Harry indicated, and Draco started off at a brisk pace. Harry had to run to catch up.

" Draco, wait, I have something I want to say," Harry said, catching the sleeve of Draco's jacket.

" Don't touch me," Draco snarled. " You've done enough of that lately, and I'm not feeling particularly generous at the moment."

He pulled away from Harry, striding purposely towards the brightly lit sign indicating the entrance to the underground. Harry trailed behind, wondering what to make of this new complication. They rode out the trip in silence, and upon arriving at the flat, Draco went directly to the bedroom and shut the door.

" Draco, please, I want to apologize, I'm sorry for what I did."

The door swung open with such alacrity that Harry nearly fell inwards.

" What exactly are you sorry for, Harry?" Draco asked.

" For, uh, you know. Getting mad at you for, well…" Harry pushed his hand through his hair, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. " I'm sorry I yelled at you, I guess."

" You guess?"

" Well, what do you want me to say?" Harry said, somewhat vexed.

" Just forget it. I'm tired, and I want to sleep. Leave me alone until you figure out why I'm really mad at you."

Draco turned his back on Harry and slid into bed, leaving a bewildered Harry in the bedroom doorway. Harry brushed his teeth and took out his contact lenses. He put on a pair of boxers and a faded T-shirt. He walked quietly back into the room; Draco was asleep. Harry got his first real look at the spot where Draco had been struck, and he gulped. Walking quickly back to the kitchen, he wrapped some ice in a plastic bag, covered the bag in a tea towel, and then crept back into his room. He knelt on the carpet, next to the bed, and gently shook Draco awake.

" What now? You had better be dying or something," Draco muttered.

" You need to put some ice on that bruise. It's probably too late, but it can't hurt to try and ease the swelling," Harry said.

" I'll be fine. It's not the first time," Draco said, closing his eyes again. He heard Harry shift, and then cold ice was pressed gently to his cheek.

" I know this has happened before, but I also know when it happened to me, I always wished someone would come and clean me up afterwards, and make sure I was okay," Harry said. He was carefully holding the ice over the visible swelling, trying to ignore the slight ache in his arms from the unnatural position. " And I'm sorry for letting you face Dudley on your own; for not backing you up. I was scared."

" Your cousin is an idiot – not someone who needs to be feared."

" I wasn't afraid of Dudley," Harry said softly.

" Curious," Draco said. " I wasn't sure you were capable of admitting what really made you afraid."

" I was scared of you. Because you were supposed to be safe, someone I wasn't going to fall for, and then even if I did, you would never reciprocate. And then it seems that I did, and you do, and it was all too much."

Draco reached up and patted the hand that held the cooling compress to his face. " Apology accepted, Harry."

It truly was something to be savoured: having someone see to your every hurt. Had anyone ever taken care of Draco with the same tenderness and patience as Harry was? And Harry was right, even though the bruise was not that painful, having someone sooth it made all the difference. Draco felt a thousand other hurts expunged by Harry's actions: an internal healing. He wanted to bask in the warmth of compassion that flowed off Harry in waves. Draco couldn't remember when he'd last felt so safe, and so peaceful.

When two warm lips pressed against his own it seemed a very natural progression of events. No panic, or unease, only the most perfect sensation ever experienced. Harry withdrew from the kiss, and Draco opened his eyes wide.

" Is this okay?" Harry asked hesitantly.

A loaded question. For Harry was not asking merely for permission to kiss, but rather for assurance that it was okay to want to kiss, okay to have the desires he had, and okay to be who he was. How was Draco to answer such an important question? What platitudes could he possibly offer to console or reassure Harry that everything he was feeling was normal? That Draco was feeling the very same things, and that it was indeed frightening, but also stunningly beautiful?

Draco reached out and plucked the ice bag from Harry's chilled fingers. He placed it on the bedside table, and threaded his fingers with Harry's. He wanted to tell Harry so many things, but he settled for the most honest answer he could give to the question asked. It was simply,

" Yes."

A shy smile stole over Harry's face, and then they were kissing again, lips melding gently at first, and then with greater enthusiasm. Draco freed a hand to let it slide through Harry's hair, intentionally bringing him closer so he could taste more of his mouth. One of Harry's hands pushed against the centre of Draco's chest, to steady his kneeling position, while the other remained firmly clenched in Draco's.

How long had they been like this? Surely Harry's back must be aching, his feet cold, and his muscles sore from kneeling over the bed? Absolutely they were, but still his lips remained, greedy for more. Each taste was slightly different; every meeting of mouths as soft as the first time, and every slight parting as dreadful as the last.

Mouths opened; tongues entered curiously, tentatively. The twin tongues met, velvety warm wet muscles sliding past each other, off to explore still more of the wonders being offered. Slick, sharp teeth, and smooth moist skin. Reverence and urgency not nearly so incompatible as supposed.

Bursts of warm hot breath came with greater succession, as they both struggled for the air they needed to continue. Draco slid his hand from where it had become entangled in Harry's hair, and brought it alongside the other man's face, trying to keep the inevitable moment of parting from

happening too soon. Harry felt the same, and risked his precarious balance to stroke the side of Draco's cheek.

The slight hiss of pain from the contact with the livid bruise was faint, but close as they were, Harry couldn't ignore it. Breaking free from the stupor caused by the intoxication of Draco's mouth, he began to taste the overlying flavours of alcohol and the coppery aftertaste of blood. Rational thought began intruding, and Harry slowly retreated from the embrace, placing kisses on Draco's lips that were so tender they were almost imperceptible. Almost.

Harry started to laugh quietly. Draco, rather perturbed at being brought back down to earth, pouted slightly.

" What's so funny?"

" I was just thinking of Dudley's face when you accused him of being queer," Harry explained.

Draco snorted, and turned his face back towards the bedroom ceiling. " For one thing, I didn't accuse anybody, I merely hinted, and your cousin leapt to conclusions. Rather defensive, wasn't he? And for another: you really know how to break the mood Harry, you know that? Getting me to picture that monstrosity of a sideshow circus attraction: 'fat man swallows own face' …"

" Oh, come on, even I'll admit he's not that bad," Harry responded, laughing at Draco's description nonetheless.

Draco gave a shudder of revulsion, " I thought I was being polite. Him being your cousin and all. Did your aunt mate with the elephant man by chance?"

" I can't believe he's a part of my family," Harry said, lip curling with dislike.

" He's not. He's a relative, for certain, but like so many things, family is a condition of the mind. You choose who belongs in your family."

" Who's in yours?"

Draco smiled, " Right now? Just you. And just so you don't go attempting to be witty, I'm telling you now I'm not the 'little woman', got it?"

" Perish the thought," Harry said, an angelic tone at odds with the devilish glint in his eyes. " But you are in my family, then, since I get to pick. Along with my godfather, and Ron and Hermione."

" You sure you want all that sibling rivalry? I mean, think of the envy that I'll cause them."

Harry rolled his eyes. " Well, the position I'll give you in my family, is hardly one of brother, so it shouldn't be a problem. I'm sure they'll learn to live with it."

Draco became serious, " Will they? Do you think you'll tell them… that I'm here?"

" I'm not very good at keeping secrets," Harry replied. They held each other's gaze for a moment, before Harry broke in, " For instance, your breath reeks. Rule number one about going out clubbing, is that you brush your teeth immediately when you get back."

" Of all the nerve! At least I had the good sense to lie in the nice cosy bed – I bet you're freezing."

Harry's expression was admittance enough. He got to his feet, stretching tense neck muscles, and waiting for circulation to return to his legs. For the first time he registered that his knees were sore.

" Do me a favour, and do not mention to Mike that I have rather bad rug-burn on my knees?" Harry said, walking around to his side of the bed.

" Why would Mike care about… Oh," Draco said. The thought of what Harry was implying caused a slight blush to come over his features. Draco threw back the covers, and slipped from the bed.

" Where are you going?" Harry asked.

" Rule number one, remember?"

Draco brushed his teeth thoroughly, then flossed, then gargled mouthwash, before repeating the entire process over again.

" Bad breath indeed," Draco muttered indignantly. He then caught himself grinning as he recalled every delicious moment of the bedroom encounter. Who cares that he got a fist to the face, a kiss like that was more then worth it. A random thought caused him to frown slightly. Unless, Harry hadn't thought the kiss was all that special. Of course, he made Draco a member of his family, but had also accused him of bad breath. Had he been joking? What if he had slobbered or drooled or something? What if Harry simply had a sick and twisted attraction to bruised individuals? What if someone had slipped something into their drinks? Such paranoid worries kept Draco in the bathroom for quite some time.

When he finally crept silently back into the bedroom, Harry's back was to him. As he pulled back the blankets, Harry rolled over, and peered up at Draco sleepily.

" Something the matter?"

" Was it really that bad?"

" Huh? What?"

Draco stood, the edge of the blankets clutched white-knuckled in his hand, his head cocked slightly to the side, his entire posture tightly drawn. He looked a little bit fey-like, as though he would disappear at the first sudden gesture. He looked more then a little frail in his flannel pyjamas (that Harry had insisted he get, and that Draco secretly loved), with his broken face, and slender feet treading one against the other.

" Kissing. Was I bad at it?"

Harry smiled, pulling the blankets from Draco's fingers, and patting the bed in invitation. " Now who's being stupid? Get in before you freeze."

Draco climbed in gingerly, " So it was good, bad breath and all?"

" It was the best kiss I've ever had," Harry said sincerely. " Though there's still room for improvement. Practice is warranted: we'll have to do it over and over again, in every spare minute, at every opportunity, I'm afraid."

" Slave driver," Draco muttered. " And can I add that that is the cheesiest line I've ever been forced to listen to?"

" Can't hear you, I'm asleep," Harry said, pulling the blankets over himself and snuggling down. Draco yanked the blankets back.

" If you were asleep, your snoring would be rattling the walls by now."

" I do not snore!"

" Can't hear you, I'm asleep," Draco retorted smugly. They fought over the blankets for a moment, and as usual, Draco won. Just as they were falling asleep, Harry pressed a final kiss to Draco's temple.

" 'Night, Draco."

" Goodnight, Harry."

And it was a good night. A very good night.

Draco was humming. Actually humming, as he made breakfast. This was worth noting since Malfoy's, as a general rule, didn't hum. They also didn't laugh raucously, sing, or pull faces. Then again, when had a Malfoy last been this ecstatically happy? He hadn't bothered getting out of his pyjamas, and his only concession to facing the morning was that he had run a comb through his hair, and brushed his teeth: twice. Thick wool socks kept his feet warm, and every now and then, in homage to his spectacularly good mood, he would build-up a little momentum and slide on the linoleum. It was during one of his more enthusiastic slides that he went a little

too fast, and would have toppled over into an undignified heap, had Harry not appeared and caught him.

" What have I told you about sliding in the house?" Harry said, mock sternly.

" Do it more often?" Draco replied impishly.

Harry touched the side of Draco's face lightly.

" It looks better. Does it still hurt?"

A tad breathlessly, Draco replied, " I don't know. Let's test it shall we?" He kissed the corner of Harry's mouth. " Nothing yet." He pressed his lips squarely over Harry's and let them linger, while Harry responded. " Looks like I'm cured."

" And you accuse me of cheesy lines," Harry chided, releasing Draco from his grip.

" Guilty," Draco said. The toaster popped, and Harry reached for the butter, spreading it thinly on both pieces of bread. They moved around the kitchen with an ease born of familiarity, setting the table, preparing the food, and pouring the coffee. When they were finished with breakfast, and were lingering in the cozy kitchen, Draco asked,

" What do we do today?"

" I was thinking we'd have a perfectly lazy Sunday. Read the paper, drink coffee, that sort of thing."

" So we're doing nothing?"

" Well… yeah. Unless you have something in mind?"

" A whole day with just you?" Draco said, and pretended to ponder things. " Occasionally, Harry, you really do have some good ideas."

Harry beamed, and Draco laughed. It seemed whatever had gone so well last night, had carried through to the morning. For it was shaping up to be a good day. A very good day.

I'd like reviews, but your threats will have to be very creative to faze me now. And hey, bribery always works wonders… See you next chapter!

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Chapter: 7

Red mittens, cooking shows, and the crowd favourite, Draco sliding around on linoleum - so did you miss me? Sorry! If it helps, it's the beginning of finals week, and instead of studying (which is what I really, really, want to be doing ***wink *wink**), I've produced the latest chapter. I need to answer a few questions, but if you could care less then skip all this junk. Many want to know how long this is going to be. Umm, I will hazard a guess that we are about halfway. Am I going to add any more characters? Ron and Hermione will definitely be making a cameo appearance sometime (ooh, what a scene I have planned), anyone else, probably not (how long do you want this to be? Sheesh!) Am I ever getting back to the Lucius thing? Yes, eventually (I really do have the whole thing worked out, I swear), but I wish to emphasize that this is a romance, meaning that while I may wax on poetically for five pages about the exact shade of Harry's hair, I doubt I'll spend three sentences on Lucius' politics. I want to focus on the troubles of the relationship more then anything else – so expect at least three more chapters of fuzzy, warm, couply stuff. A few of you mentioned my grammar (or lack thereof). I can't promise that I'll edit any more intensively then I've already been doing, since, if I did, these chapters would take even longer to get out (and nobody wants that, right?) Finally, a few have asked if I'm archived anywhere other then , and the answer is… no. Well, there's my site, but I don't actually control that and it hasn't been updated in awhile, and there were a few requests to have this story posted at a few sites, but maybe my e-mail is warped, because I replied and never heard from them again. I think that's it - keep the questions coming, and if you've requested to archive my story and I haven't gotten back to you, try again, because I may have screwed up somewhere. This is dedicated to my roommate: Happy X-Mas! Thanks so much everyone (sorry I babbled!) Enjoy!

" Hey, Draco, come lend me a hand, will y'a?" Harry yelled from just outside the front door. Draco got up from his sprawled position on the couch with a lazy sigh, and propped the door open, while Harry struggled to bring in a heavy, unwieldy, box. The bottom of the box had failed and Harry had to carry it carefully with one hand bracing the box flaps closed.

Harry brought the decrepit box into the main room and let it fall. The box promptly divulged its contents all over the floor; a deluge of neatly rolled newspapers spread out in a sea of black and white all over the carpet.

" You know, when you said read the paper, I thought you meant paper as in one, singular. Not the complete works of the last few decades," Draco scoffed.

Harry reddened slightly. " It's been a couple months, I admit. They come bi-weekly, and I put them in the box, swearing I'll read them later, and then… well, you can see for yourself how well my method is working."

Draco smiled and began putting the newspapers in chronological order. Draco diligently took-up the first one and began to read, noting that it was dated well before his arrival. ' Wonder what happened while I was in seclusion?' Draco thought. Harry ignored the meticulously arranged order, and grabbed a newspaper at random, earning him a reproachful glare from Draco.

Taking no notice, Harry flipped directly to the sports pages. Professional Quidditch had been cancelled for the duration of the war; large crowds, like those attending game matches, were simply too vulnerable to an attack. Quidditch was gradually getting reorganized, however, and there was much heated debate over possible teams and try-outs. After picking his way through a few more sports articles, Harry soon got bored, and turned to a more engaging activity. Watching Draco.

The long elegant fingers that turned the pages gently, the intent expression that would alternate between being thoughtful or frowning, dependent upon the reading material, and even the way he swallowed his last few sips of coffee, were worthy of the utmost attention. Draco wet his lips, and Harry wondered if he would ever blink again. Draco and coffee – the combination definitely had its appeal.

" I must say I'm impressed, Potter," Draco said dryly, not looking up from his paper.

" Huh? What?" Harry mumbled, breaking out of his silent reverie. He came to realize that while he had been daydreaming, he had rested his head against his paper, and now newsprint had left a grey smudge across his cheekbone.

" You're the first person I've met who can read a paper through osmosis," Draco replied, smirking slightly.

" Shut-up," Harry said. " What are you reading anyway? Looks fascinating."

" Oh it is," Draco enthused. " It's a horrible time to have money in the marketplace, of course, but the economic theories being presented during this fiscal crisis are really quite…" Draco trailed off when he noticed Harry was trying desperately to keep a straight face. " And you couldn't care less, since you're really just mocking me. Honestly, don't you know sarcasm is the lowest form of humour?"

" Well, you would know, being an expert at it, as compared to my amateurish fumbling," Harry said. " Just answer me this, do you have a coin collection?"

" Of course I do, doesn't everyone?"

" I'm living with a nerd," Harry muttered.

" Quiet you. And go get me some more coffee," Draco said imperiously, immersing himself back in the stock market, and ignoring the triumphant chuckling he heard coming from Harry.

Several newspapers later, the coffee had run dry, and Harry was flipping idly through the more recent papers, looking at the moving pictures. Ironically enough, it was a non-moving photograph that suddenly arrested his attention. It was a blonde woman; her cool blue eyes were fixed slightly to the right of the camera lens as though she couldn't be bothered to turn her head,

and there was no hint of a smile on her uncompromising face. For all that, it was still a highly attractive face, one that spoke of breeding and expensive care. In many ways, the woman reminded Harry of Draco. Which was understandable, seeing that the photograph was of his mother, Narcissa Malfoy. The deceased Narcissa Malfoy.

Why did he have to be the one to find this particular article? If Draco had come across it himself, then Harry wouldn't be in the position of having to find the right way of telling Draco his mother was dead. Then again, maybe it would be better if Draco heard it from a person, instead of coming across it by accident.

Harry steeled himself, and took a few steadying breaths. He looked up only to find Draco looking straight back at him, one elegant eyebrow raised in silent query.

" It's… oh, Draco, I'm so sorry, but…" Harry was stuttering, searching for the right words. Draco plucked the paper from Harry's shaky hands.

Draco read the article through quickly, and then he read it over again with greater concentration. Every time he got to the end of the brief paragraph, he started again at the top, almost as if he believed that if he kept on reading indefinitely, it would never actually become reality. His mother; dead. He had had his suspicions, and in most of his thoughts, he had already accepted that he was never going to see her again, and yet somehow a small part of him was still shocked. Until this proof, there had always been the tiniest flicker of hope that it wasn't true, that his mother was alive and well and as uncaring as ever. Now the hope was gone, and pain replaced it. He hadn't anticipated any pain, but he supposed it was inevitable in a relationship that had always been plagued with regrets. He regretted the fact that they had never talked about Lucius, the one subject they would have agreed upon. He regretted that her life had been, for the most part, a life of disappointment. He regretted that she had had to die before her natural time, and that she had died alone. Nobody should die alone.

" I kind-of knew she was dead. But it still hurts, the shock, does that make any sense?" Draco whispered. He felt Harry's hand on his shoulder, and wondered how long it had been there.

" Knowing something for sure is always different then just thinking it, and there are some things we just can't prepare for," Harry said tentatively. " Is there anything you want me to do?"

" No… I," Draco didn't bother to finish his sentence. He didn't know what he wanted to say anyway. " I hate this photo of her. I can't see her properly. She would have hated it, she would never have let this picture go out into the public," Draco said, suddenly angry. He could just bet that his father had chosen it for the very reason that Narcissa would have disapproved. Even in death, his father would have wanted the last word. He vehemently and methodically began ripping the paper apart with his fingers.

Harry stood up, and uncovered his old school trunk, which stood in the corner of the room under a cheap tablecloth and served as a makeshift side-table. He lifted the lid and began searching through his belongings, finally coming upon his pile of photo albums. He quickly grabbed the

one from his fourth year at Hogwarts, sending a quick thank you to Hermione for having organized and labelled all his photos at one point, and began flipping through the pages.

There had been several photos taken while he, Ron, Hermione, and the rest of the Weasley family had attended the Quidditch World Cup. He was looking for one in particular; a photo where the aim had been a bit off, and instead of showing the grinning faces of him and his friends, the image was that of Narcissa and Draco, who had been sitting in the row behind. He remembered the image because when Ron had first seen the photo, he had come up with numerous nefarious ways for disposing of it. For some reason though, Harry had held onto the photo, despite the fact that it depicted his then worst enemy. Now, he was exceedingly grateful that he had.

" Here. It's the only one I've got, I'm afraid. But she looks… sort-of content, or something. You can keep it," Harry said, handing Draco the photo.

Draco traced his fingers lightly over the photograph. In the picture, Narcissa was comfortably seated with her long legs crossed, and her hands resting lightly on a program in her lap. Her eyes roved slightly, obviously following the trajectory of the Quidditch players, and then the Draco in the picture leaned towards her and spoke. Narcissa inclined her head towards him, listening, and then she gave a brief nod before resuming her carefully sculpted position. Draco wished he could remember what idle pleasantry he had said to her that day, but he couldn't. So he merely watched as the pattern repeated itself: Narcissa watching the game, her expression peaceful, and then turning to converse with Draco.

Theirs had never been a loving relationship, nor even a close one, and Draco didn't want to romanticize it even now that she was gone, but this photo… It was so simple, so subtle, and exactly the way he wanted to remember her.

" Thank you," Draco said sincerely.

" I know it's not much. And I'm really very sorry Draco," Harry said anxiously. He was expecting some reaction from Draco, anger maybe, or bitterness, but instead, he was faced with a detached, non-talkative Draco, who didn't even seem to know that Harry was still in the room.

" Is it okay, if I just be alone for awhile?" Draco asked. Harry nodded, and Draco, still gazing at the photo, went into the bedroom and closed the door. Harry sat in the living room, wishing he could ease Draco's pain, and knowing that he couldn't.

To keep his mind off things, Harry started rummaging through his Hogwarts memorabilia. His Quidditch robes were folded carefully near the bottom along with a replica snitch that someone had gotten him for Christmas years ago. There were the rest of his photo albums, as well as the school yearbooks. On impulse, he flipped to Draco's picture, and wasn't surprised to find him sneering in almost every shot. The fifth year photo, however, showed a much more sombre Draco, and there was no yearbook for the sixth year – the war had put a stop to such frivolities.

Harry looked up the rest of his friends, and saw that Draco wasn't the only one who had changed over the years. Hermione, Ron, his dorm-mates; everyone had matured, grown, and their personalities had become solidified and certain. Even himself, he admitted, had changed, and in some ways, not entirely for the better. For one thing, he would never again have that look of wonder and innocence that his first year self wore so clearly.

So, if anyone were to ever ask, how he could forgive Draco Malfoy for all his past transgressions, Harry would be able to tell them, that he didn't need to. Because the person who had done those things didn't exist any more, and neither did the person that had been hurt. So Harry smiled when he found evidence of the stupid pranks Draco had pulled on him, especially when the tricks were ones that had backfired. He pulled out other mementos – sweet wrappers that still smelled heavenly, and trading cards that had long since lost their charms; textbooks and jars of decaying potion ingredients with the labels beginning to yellow and peel. There was the first infamous Weasley jumper he had ever received still shoved in a corner of the trunk, and as he held it out, he couldn't help thinking that it looked ridiculously small. Harry pulled out scraps of parchment, notes that his friends had scribbled out hastily, along with broken quills, and pots of dried up ink. There were three perfectly shaped white feathers, tied with a black silk bow, in remembrance of his owl, Hedwig. Finally, his hands settled on a thin case that contained his wand.

Harry packed away his belongings again, but left the wand case out. He stared at it for quite a long time as though expecting it to do something other then just lie there. Eventually, he reached out, flipped the small golden clasp, and lifted the lid. Harry lightly touched the wand, but didn't pick it up. The phoenix feather at the core had turned to ash the instant that Harry had cast the Avada Kedavra curse on Voldemort. He knew this because his wand had broken in two when he had tried to use it to stab deep into Voldemort's flesh, as he lay dying. That was one piece of information that had never made the press; the world wanted a hero, not someone who in the end had given in to hate, and bitterness. Harry wasn't too sure if his wand would even work properly anymore, but he wasn't concerned with finding out just yet. Maybe someday, he would want this part of his life back, but not yet. He closed the wand case with a decisive click, and put it back in the trunk.

Feeling more then a little melancholic due to the circumstances, Harry found that though it was past dinner, he wasn't all that hungry. He stood in the kitchen, noticing little signs of Draco's influence, like how there were spices lined out across the stovetop (alphabetically arranged of course), and actual fresh fruit in the fruit bowl. Harry reached up into the cupboards and retrieved two large earthenware mugs. On the stove he prepared some thick, dark, and aromatic hot cocoa, and poured the steaming mixture into the two cups.

Carrying the drinks carefully, Harry entered his bedroom. At first, it seemed the room was empty, but once Harry's eyes had adjusted to the gloomy light, he saw Draco outside on the narrow wrought iron balcony, staring out at the coming night. The sliding glass door was partially open, and Harry pushed it wider still.

" I thought maybe you might want something to drink," Harry said. Draco looked up and took

the proffered cup. Draco gratefully took a sip, wrapping his chilled hands around the warm mug, as Harry wavered on the threshold, unsure whether his presence was welcomed or not.

Draco seemed to notice Harry's hesitation, and took pity on his indecisiveness. " Sit down, Harry."

Harry was pleased at the invitation, but tried not to appear too eager. There wasn't a lot of space on the balcony – it was about a person's length long, and only a few steps deep. Harry slid down awkwardly at the end of the balcony, near Draco's feet. It was a rather uncomfortable position, but Harry didn't complain, though he couldn't help but shiver in his thin T-shirt when a cold night wind blew across the balcony.

Two strong arms suddenly wrapped around Harry's waist, and before he could protest, he was being pulled up against a warm chest. Harry wound up sitting between Draco's legs, with his back to Draco's chest. Draco leaned up against the sidewall, and rested his chin on Harry's shoulder. As though offering an explanation for his action, Draco said,

" You looked cold."

" I'm thinking you're probably colder."

" I'm not the one shivering," Draco replied. Harry remained stiff in Draco's arms, wanting to sink into the unexpected warmth, but not quite able to. Curious, Draco asked, " Why do you do that?"

" Do what? Shiver?"

" No, I mean, why do you get so tense and nervy when someone gets close to you?"

" Because it's so strange," Harry answered quietly. " Unfamiliar."

" So you don't like to be touched?" Draco asked, his voice soft in Harry's ear.

Harry paused to consider his response. " I like to be touched. I like it when you touch me," Harry said, laying his hands over Draco's as though to emphasize this point. " It's just that this is all new, and maybe it comes natural to some, but it might take me some time."

" I've got lots of time," Draco said patiently, seeking to soothe the anxiety he heard in Harry's voice.

And so, Draco waited for Harry to get accustomed to the new arrangement, saying nothing, yet being supportive just the same. It was remarkably comfortable, Draco thought, sitting as they were on the balcony. With his chin positioned as it was on Harry's shoulder, he could breathe in the smell of Harry's hair. His right hand was draped over Harry's stomach, rising and falling with every breath. In his left, he held the mug of hot cocoa; warm, sweet, velvety chocolate, that

would have been charming regardless of taste, if only because Harry had made it for him. The pervading warmth that spread out from Harry's body was enough to take the chill from the air, and to melt those icy doubts that lurked within Draco's soul. Even the silence was comforting, and Harry obviously felt something similar, because he began, almost imperceptibly at first, to relax. Harry pressed tighter to Draco's chest, turning his head as though nuzzling Draco's face, and Draco accepted this gesture as proof that Harry was sufficiently reassured. Draco drew them both a little closer together, needing the contact as much as Harry did.

" That's better," Draco said.

" Yeah," Harry said. " I'm sorry, it's just… I've taught myself not to expect it, or need it. With me, because of one stupid little scar, it was always 'look but don't touch', you know?"

" Hmm, I used to hate those rules," Draco said.

" Why am I not surprised? You never did have a problem invading my personal space. Damn prat," Harry chided gently.

" I've always been a tactile person. I have to touch something before I can make myself believe its real," Draco said. He began stroking the underside of Harry's wrist with his thumb, almost without meaning to. He laughed suddenly, " It used to drive my parents mad. Nothing and nowhere was safe – museums, shops, other people's homes… I had to touch everything, even take things apart to see how they worked, and the more valuable the item, the more I wanted to reach out and grab it. My mother said that at the very least, it proved I had good taste."

The memory prompted Draco to pick up the photograph of his mother again, and he held it in front of both Harry and himself to gaze at it.

" Tell me about her," Harry requested.

" There's not much to tell. I don't really have many memories either good or bad."

" Tell me anyway," Harry insisted.

Draco stayed silent for a while, and then, suddenly, a memory appeared, something he hadn't thought about for years.

" I remember, when I was very young, my mother would let me watch her as she got ready to go out for the evening. I would sit in the middle of this huge bed, and she would sit at her vanity with seemingly endless amounts of cosmetics surrounding her, painstakingly arranging her hair and make-up. She was so adept and skilled, with a grace that comes from having done an action a thousand other times, and I used to watch in awe as though this was a show she was enacting just for me. Then she would notice the time, and would call for a house-elf to come take me away, but as she pushed me out the door, there would always be this sudden rush of perfume, and powder, and warmth. I used to imagine when I went to bed that I could still smell that scent

in the air, and it made me feel very safe."

" I liked that one, tell me another," Harry encouraged. It went on like this, well into the night, with Draco telling stories about his mother as they came to mind. There were frequently times where there was nothing but silence, but Harry would wait, because eventually Draco would start speaking again. Gradually there came a point where there was nothing left to say, but still they lingered. If it was cold, they didn't feel it, and if there were anyone at all in the world other then them, they had no way of knowing. Nothing at all existed but the two of them, wrapped up in each other.

Draco came to the startling conclusion, that despite all that had occurred that day, he felt at peace. Despite all the suffering and pain, in this moment, he was content.

" Harry? Thanks for listening, and for letting me be alone before," Draco said sincerely. Getting no response, Draco detached himself slightly to look at his companion. Harry had fallen asleep, so secure and comfortable had he become in Draco's embrace, and the sight was so moving, that for a moment, Draco hardly dared breathe. Draco ran fingers through black hair, and stroked the scar on Harry's forehead with a tenderness he hadn't known he possessed. Eventually though, they had to move and with much prodding, Draco woke Harry sufficiently to get him as far as the bed, where Harry promptly fell back asleep. Draco tucked Harry under the covers, before moving to the other side of the bed, and falling into his own dreamless sleep.

The following morning was a Monday. Harry disliked Mondays. No, thought Harry, as he reached for his glasses and instead managed to knock both the glasses and the bedside lamp onto the floor with a loud crash, he hated Mondays. The alarm clock decided at that moment to start ringing shrilly. Usually, Harry would have turned it off the moment he awoke (Harry generally woke up a few minutes before the alarm was set to go off), to avoid hearing the incessant beeping, but today he had forgotten, and the noise startled him. Harry could already tell it was going to be one of those days.

Having dispatched his alarm clock in such a manner that the clock was unlikely to ever have a function beyond that of paperweight, Harry rolled over and buried his head under his pillow. In seconds his pillow was rather rudely taken away from him.

" Do not go back to sleep," Draco said sternly. Harry protested, using a well thought out and articulated argument. He whined.

" But I don't wanna go to school. You can't make me."

" Yes, you do want to go. You like learning. And if you don't go, you'll have to stay here with me all day, and watch me alphabetize your bookshelves."

" That doesn't sound so bad," Harry mumbled, pulling the blankets over his head.

" Cross referenced by genre, and subject matter, and complete with a list that I'll write out,

which will include the placement of your books, a brief synopsis for each one, and possibly a short statement regarding their condition."

" All right, all right, I'll go! Psycho," Harry said, getting bored just listening to the description of Draco's day. Still unbelievably sleepy, and intensely jealous that Draco could, if he so desired, spend the entire day in bed, Harry got to his feet, realizing for the first time that he was still dressed in his clothes from yesterday. He looked questioningly at Draco.

" Sorry, I was going to undress you after you fell asleep last night, but then I worried I wouldn't be able to control myself," Draco said.

Harry blushed slightly, but then shook his head, " Why do I get the feeling there's more to it then that?"

" Okay, so I was really too lazy and sleepy to do it myself. Now, don't you think the lie was ever so much more flattering for both of us?" Draco said.

Harry rolled his eyes, and went to take a shower. He came back to his empty bedroom to find his bed already made. After getting dressed, he searched the floor for his glasses, only to find that the lamp had crushed them to pieces. Fortunately, the hideous lamp was just fine. Groaning slightly, Harry returned to the bathroom and struggled with his contact lenses. Blinking rapidly, he headed into the kitchen, where Draco was annoyingly cheerful.

" What's for breakfast?" Harry grumbled.

" Nothing with that attitude," Draco retorted.

" Draco, darling, you are not only the smartest, handsomest, cunning… uh, est, person I know, but you are also the best cook in the whole wide world, so can I pretty please have some breakfast?" Harry said, his voice sickeningly sweet, and his eyelashes fluttering (the latter mostly because his contacts were still bothering him, but Harry was hoping it added to the winsome affect).

" Ugh, I'll feed you only if you promise to never do that again," Draco said, grimacing. He put a plate of food in front of Harry, along with a cup of coffee that Harry latched onto as if it were gold. " And you missed the most important part. That I look adorably cute in my pyjamas."

" Draco, you gave me coffee. For that you shall have my undying devotion," Harry replied.

" And?" Draco prodded, brandishing his spatula like a weapon.

" And you look adorably cute in your pyjamas," Harry said with a sigh.

" Damn straight," Draco said.

Harry's day did not improve overly after he left his flat. To begin with, he was late to his first class, and the teacher paused unhappily while Harry searched for a seat, finally finding one right smack in the middle of the row, forcing everyone already seated to shuffle around as he worked his way towards the chair. He spent the next hour wondering why he had bothered coming to the class, since he couldn't really focus, and ended up writing little snippets of stories and random rants in the margin of his notepaper.

His next class wasn't for a while so he thought he would go to the library to study, but unfortunately he ran into someone he knew. Unfortunate because the person, Dale, wasn't someone he really got along with, but Dale had never caught onto the fact that Harry was less then enthusiastic about their encounters. Harry was forced to listen to Dale ramble on about his latest drunken adventure, and only got away when it was time for his next class. Dale followed him right up to the door.

His classics class (the mythology of ancient Greece) was fortunately quite interesting, and he was able to stay awake. He dropped his favourite pen as he was leaving however, and it is never, ever, wise to stop and search the ground when vacating a classroom filled with a few hundred other students. Sighing, he gave the pen up as a lost cause, and hurried to make his next class, which was all the way across campus. By the time the day was over, Harry felt completely drained, and was asking himself why he had ever wanted to attend university, when he really didn't have to. Oh, it had sounded good enough in the beginning, but somehow the thought of the projects and papers that would be due soon, was making him question both his decision and his sanity. Quite honestly, writing an analytical paper on 'the role of poetry in the 21st century' sounded particularly onerous.

Walking home, Harry indulged in a little self-pity. His stomach was growling, his muscles were sore from sitting in ridiculously small desks with hard plastic seats all day, and his eyes were killing him because he was not accustomed to wearing his contacts for so long. Plus, he realized he had forgotten to get a new pair of glasses after class, as intended. He considered back tracking, but the flat was in view, and it was already late, so he told himself to screw it, and kept on walking.

The door to the flat seemed unwilling to cooperate with the key, and in the end, Harry just kept banging on the door until Draco opened it for him.

" No need to ask how your day was," Draco observed, as Harry brushed past him. Harry headed directly for the couch, dropping his book-bag, his shoes, and his coat on the way. He crawled onto the couch, lying flat on his stomach, and breathed a great sigh of relief that he was finally home, and that the day was nearly over.

" You okay?" Draco asked, concerned. Harry didn't move so his voice came muffled through the couch.

" I'm fine. Just one of those days, I guess."

Harry felt a comforting hand gently touch his shoulder.

" Wow, tense enough?" Draco asked rhetorically. Draco placed his other hand on Harry's shoulder and started to tentatively massage the stiff muscles. " Is this helping, or should I stop? I've never really done this before."

" Mmm good yes. No stop you," Harry said, near incoherently.

Draco smirked at Harry's lost ability to speak actual sentences, and redoubled his efforts. It was almost intoxicating to be so in control of a situation. Draco leaned in closer, his fingers drifting to touch the soft, pale skin on Harry's neck, an area usually hidden by the back of Harry's hair. There was no protest from Harry, so Draco grew a little bolder, sliding both his hands down Harry's spine, exploring the planes and the muscles of his back. Draco's own back started to hurt, stooped over as he was. A solution came instantly to mind, but he wondered how Harry would react. Harry sure looked relaxed though, so maybe…

Draco made certain to keep up his gentle massage, as he settled himself on top of Harry, straddling the slim hips. Harry's eyes sprang open, and he tried to crane his head around to look at Draco, but soon gave up on the idea, as it required too much effort. So instead, he queried,

" Draco?"

" I… I was tired of standing, but I could move if you wanted."

Draco waited with baited breath for Harry's decision. When Harry spoke it was barely above a whisper, " I don't mind, I mean, if it's easier for you this way."

Draco smiled, and resumed the steady motion of his hands over Harry's back and shoulders. Harry's breathing began to slow and deepen; his green eyes had long since drifted closed. Draco wasn't so much massaging anymore as he was stroking, loving the feel of Harry beneath his hands, beneath his body. He had a sudden desire to feel skin, and as he had never been very good at denying himself the sensation of touch, he was soon slipping his hands under the edge of Harry's cotton shirt. Harry started slightly at the intrusion, but then, almost as quickly, he stilled, permitting Draco to continue.

Harry's skin felt warm and soft under Draco's questing fingers. There were scars present – Draco could feel the slight ridges of damaged skin and he paid homage to every mark. He rubbed gently at the muscles he encountered, making a thorough progression up Harry's back. As his hands reached Harry's shoulders, much of Harry's shirt had ridden up, uncovering the pale white lines of healed over wounds, and revealing large areas of smooth golden skin, which contrasted pleasantly with Draco's pale hands. Harry shivered, feeling Draco's breath brush over him, as Draco leaned forward, ostensibly to be in a better position to massage Harry's shoulders.

It was the shiver that broke the last of Draco's resolve.

Draco pressed fervent lips to Harry's body. Retracing the pathway his fingertips had taken, Draco caressed the trembling skin with his mouth. When Harry's breathing began to speed up, Draco could feel the vibrations. He loved the soft feel of Harry's flesh against his sensitive lips, loved the warmth. With his tongue he traced the more obvious scars, wondering at their origin, promising himself he would ask later. He reached Harry's shoulder blades, pushing the bunched material of Harry's shirt out of his way, and then his body was pressed flat along Harry's back, as he kissed behind Harry's ear and moved towards his jaw-line.

Harry had gone into sensory overload the moment he had felt Draco's cool hands on his body. The feeling of lips tracing gently over his responsive skin, had sent his nerve endings screaming. He struggled to turn over, and Draco, once realizing his intent, allowed him room to manoeuvre. Draco now lay flush against Harry, chest-to-chest, and nose-to-nose.

" Hi," Harry ventured, gazing straight into darkened grey eyes.

" Hi yourself," Draco said, grinning slightly.

" Quite the massage," Harry said, returning the smile. " I don't think kissing is generally involved."

" I told you I was new at this. I just followed my instincts."

" Good instincts," Harry said. He lifted up his head slightly, and Draco lowered his, and then they were kissing each other, deeply and passionately. Draco's hands greedily sought out skin again, becoming frustrated with Harry's shirt, which had become twisted. Draco broke away from the kiss, muttering,

" Off with the shirt." Harry flushed, but didn't hesitate to help Draco, who was eagerly pulling up on the fabric. Draco's eyes swept over Harry's chest hungrily, coming to rest on a small glint of gold. A smile made his eyes light up, as he said, " That I didn't know about. A nipple ring Potter? Most intriguing."

Harry blushed a deeper red; " I got it when I turned eighteen. A birthday gift to myself."

" Did it hurt?"

" Like you wouldn't believe, but it doesn't hurt anymore. Of course, it'll always be rather sensitive…" Harry let out an undignified squeak, blocking out whatever else he was going to say, as Draco reached out and gave the small golden ring a little pull.

At Harry's response, Draco said, rather breathily, " Ooh, I definitely like this." Before Harry could respond, Draco's mouth was once again pressed to Harry's. While tongues delved deeply into hot cavernous mouths, Draco's hands roamed the entirety of Harry's bare chest. Completely involved in what he was doing, it came as something as a shock when Draco felt Harry's hands on his skin, kneading the flesh at the small of his back. Harry gloated over Draco's reaction,

glad that he too had the ability to shock and delight.

The encounter became more passionate, more needy. There was a definite rocking motion to their hips now, and the heat building between them was getting hard to ignore. Their lips separated only to take desperate gulps of necessary oxygen, before slamming into each other again, growing more and more reckless and wild. Draco pressed his palm against Harry's nipples, feeling them harden. He traced the outline of the gold ring with his fingernail before giving it a slight tug, hoping for a strong reaction.

He got one. Several things happened at once: Harry groaned, and there was an unmistakeable jolt of arousal, made more obvious when Harry instinctively thrust his hips upwards against Draco's.

" Oh God, I'm sorry," Harry burst out. He began pushing at Draco, trying to wriggle out from under the blond.

" Huh? What?" Draco said, completely mystified. But although Draco tried to calm Harry down, to get him to talk, Harry was not to be reasoned with.

" Please, get off me," Harry said plaintively. Draco couldn't refuse such a request, no matter how much it hurt him. He pulled away, and Harry stumbled off the couch, and went straight to the bathroom, shutting the door firmly.

Draco stared at the ceiling, waiting for his breathing to slow down to its regular pace. That was the easy part - next he had to get his whirlwind thoughts into some kind-of order. It seemed that lately his thoughts and emotions were getting pushed and pulled all over the place, and Draco for one was getting tired of it. Why should he feel guilty for what he had done? Harry had wanted it, he felt sure. Charged with indignant energy at his unfair treatment, Draco stood up. He rapped sharply on the bathroom door.

" Harry? I'm coming in," Draco said, swinging the door open. Harry was sitting in a pathetic little ball on the bathroom rug, leaning up against the bathtub. " What the hell just happened?"

" I know! I'm sorry – I'll never do it again."

" Harry, try to think like a normal human being for a change, and explain to me what it is you think you've done wrong?"

Harry's face turned a dark crimson colour, and he dropped his gaze to the floor. With his finger he traced the grout line of the bathroom's floor tile. " I… it moved."

" It moved," Draco repeated coolly. Draco crossed his arms over his chest and leaned a hip against the sink. " What moved?"

" It, you know, *it*," Harry said desperately.

Draco winced, feeling like a parent describing sex for the first time to a teenager. Rubbing at the bridge of his nose to forestall the approaching headache, Draco spoke,

" You are aware that that is what generally happens to males when they're aroused?"

" Of course I know that, you idiot," Harry said darkly, a trifle angry that Draco was being so condescending. " But all we were doing was kissing, and then I had to get all hot and bothered and ruin it."

Oh, so that was it. This time when Draco spoke his voice was a little softer, " Harry, did you ever stop and think that maybe I was trying to get that kind-of reaction from you?"

" But… But you think sex is disgusting. I remember you saying that, and all I could think when it happened was that I was turning something so nice into something… sordid."

Draco stepped away from the sink, and sank down on the floor next to Harry. " If you recall me saying that I thought sex was messy, then you should also remember that I was still interested in it, providing I had found someone I really trusted. That's you Harry; I trust you completely. Though why I do when you keep pulling stunts like this, I'll never know."

Harry was quiet for a time. " So I screwed up again?"

" Big time," Draco said, putting an arm around Harry's shoulders.

" Sorry," Harry said.

" Can we clear something up right now? I'm as new at this relationship stuff as you are, maybe even newer, so when you do things like this, I don't always pick up on the reasons why. I mean, I thought for a moment just now that I had taken advantage of you, forced you to do something you didn't want to."

" No!" Harry interjected. " I liked it, all of it. I just…"

" I know; you just got scared. But that's the thing; you can't just run off and expect me to figure that out on my own. You're going to have to tell when something's bothering you, okay? And I'll do the same for you."

Harry sighed. " Okay, I agree. And I've got something already to confess."

" Now? I should have known this plan was going to backfire," Draco said. He took a deep breath, and set his shoulders in a straight line, " Okay, I'm ready. But if you tell me your leaving me for a wild fling with the Weasley twins, I can't guarantee that I won't kill you."

" I was hoping… I want us to slow down a little. Well, I don't really want to, but I think we

should. I only admitted to myself that I liked you on Saturday, then you got hit, we had a fight of sorts, then I kissed you, and then… the news about your mother," here Harry paused to squeeze Draco's hand, before continuing, " And I still have school and work, so to ignore all that is happening, and rush straight into some deeply emotional stuff, seems like a good way to wreck everything. I don't want to mess this up – you've become really important to me."

" Ah Harry, you really must tell me how you can manage to reject someone, and yet still make them feel special."

" Not rejecting, exactly. I mean, I liked what we were doing," Harry admitted. " But I think we should keep it at this level for awhile, until we've had some time to think things through properly."

" So we can mess around, so long as we keep it above the belt?" Draco asked, one eyebrow raised.

" In a manner of speaking, yes."

" But I can't pinch your butt?"

" No… Do you really want to?"

" I didn't," Draco said. Harry looked relieved. " Until you said I couldn't."

Harry rolled his eyes, and got to his feet. Draco persisted, " What if it was just a little pinch?"

" No."

" A friendly slap?"

" No."

" Okay, not even a pinch, just a nudge in passing?"

" Okay."

" Really?"

" No."

" What if I *accidentally* slipped on some ice, and happened to fall, and in doing so grabbed your posterior in order to save my very life, my life you understand, what about then?"

" Your life huh?"

" Yep, you're the only thing standing between me and a horrible, ghastly, death."

" No."

" You're a cold man, Harry Potter. A very cold man," Draco said, glowering.

Harry smiled sweetly, and gave Draco a hug.

The end of chapter seven. Okay, your mission (I won't ask for threats or bribes anymore – you people scared me!), should you choose to accept it (you don't think I'd let you get away with just reading this story did you? Don't you know I'm an evil, evil person by now?), is to write a brief summary of this story, mentioning all pertinent facts. If yours is the best, then you'll be rewarded by having it posted, with full credit given. Some prize huh? Well, sorry, but in addition to me being evil, I'm also cheap!

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Chapter: 8

Your eyes are green, like summer grass

Your lips are red, like a fresh cut rose

Your hair is soft, like an Irish stream

And your voice is filled with sweet beauty

And the last words I heard him say

Were I shall return, for you, my love

On Christmas Day

That snippet of song has nothing to do with anything, but it's one of my favourite Christmas carols, and because Harry Potter is constantly on my brain, I thought it kind-of fit. Just my way of saying Happy Holidays, everyone!

I loved reading the summaries! In fact, I was stunned so many participated. I was really only looking for a few lines about the whole story, but some of you went above and beyond the call of duty! Good job to everyone, and here are my favourites!

PissedOffEskimo: Perversion at its best! : It's about two abused boys, who desperately need to

have sex with each other to help them sort out the things that are wrong with their life.

TigerBlak: Best comment regarding favourite scene : Gasp! Drool! Over the nipple ring.

CocoKate: This one was exactly what I wanted! : Two years after the defeat of Voldermort and the destruction of Hogwarts, a neglected Draco finds healing in his schooltime rival, Harry Potter.

Moira McDuff: The most succinct summary of chapter seven I read.

Lady Malfoy II: The most flattering to my ego, so naturally it wins hands down (hee hee!) 'The best example of Harry and Draco's relationship on the web, as recommended by Kate!'

MysticalSoul: Too good. Why read my stuff, when you can read her summary of chapter seven? Author humbled by the talent of the reviewer.

T.K. Yuy: Laugh out loud favourite! "Holy. Bloody. Hell!", "Sweet. Mother. of. Merlin", or "Abso-bloody-lutly BRILIANT!"

Icy Flame: What can I say? I just love this one. Of course, I think I may be a little biased as I come off rather well in it! : The twists and turns never cease to amaze and please in IamtheLizardQueen's very own 'Welcome To The Real World'. With sassy commentary by both Draco Malfoy!, the boy who always has something to say and Harry Potter, the boy who is infinitely unpredictable this is defiantly not a tale to miss! So grab the popcorn and a blanket boys and girls, 'Welcome To The Real World' will leave you squealing with delight and crying for more!

TigerLily: I'm stealing her summary, as I think it's a great summary of the story thus far. Don't believe me? Go read it! It even got a thumbs up by DeLiRiUm drinks green tea.

Willowstar: What a depiction of my favourite part of chapter seven! : And fuck... monday's SUCK! So, Harry went to school... blah blah blah... came back, got a massage from Gorgeous boy which of course ended up in snog!heaven.

YoYoJo: If I posted this one, people would think I was totally conceited (I'm not, am I?) but maybe that's why I love it! : This is a superb fanfiction, by a marvelous author, who never fails to entertain.

Pip: Reminder of so many forgotten elements… And is there anything more honest then this? " They find out that they really really like each other."

Congratulations to all our 'winners'. I haven't decided how to use them yet, but I've been busy! Anyway, here's the story. Enjoy!

" Late, late, LATE!" Harry yelped, as he tried to drink his coffee while at the same time stuffing

his foot into his shoe. The result was hot coffee down his shirt and a broken shoelace. " Damn it!"

Draco gave a weary sigh, and held out a clean shirt for Harry, along with a different pair of shoes.

" I told you to get up earlier, but you just had to have those five minutes more…"

" Not helping," Harry muttered. Thrusting his coffee cup at Draco, he tore off his stained shirt, threw on the one Draco was holding, and stooped to actually untie his trainers this time before trying to put them on.

" I bring you clothes, and coffee, and you tell me I'm not helping?" Draco retorted, returning from the kitchen and holding out a travel mug (with a good, tight lid) of rich, hot coffee, with just the right amount of milk.

" It's the smugness I can do without," Harry said moodily. He took a sip of coffee, and moaned in rapture. He stared at the mug intensely and said, " I love you."

" Hey! I'm the one who actually made the coffee, what do you have to say to me?"

" That you know me, and my early morning routine, eerily well?" Harry replied lightly.

" True. In fact I know exactly what you're going to say…"

" Fuck! Now I really am late," Harry said, grabbing his satchel and heading for the door. Harry hit his elbow on the doorframe as he made his hasty exit, and another outburst of colourful language flowed from his mouth, only slightly muted when the door shut behind him.

" When you look at the time," Draco finished, his words greeting only the empty apartment. Shaking his head, Draco picked up the discarded shirt, tossed the abandoned shoes in the hall closet, and returned to the kitchen. There hadn't been time for breakfast that morning, for Harry at least. Draco made himself some toast, and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Moving into the living room, Draco settled down on the couch with his drink, and a mystery novel that Harry said was a classic. Draco had to admit that he did quite like this Sherlock Holmes character, identifying with some of his lesser quirks, and he amused himself by thinking that Harry was a little like the bumbling Watson, frequently bewildered and befuddled by the events around him.

Around mid-morning, Draco uncurled himself from the cozy couch, and went to clean up the kitchen. Usually, Harry and he would eat breakfast together, and then Harry would wash up the majority of their dishes, leaving only a pan or two to soak. Today, there hadn't been any time to eat, because Harry was inordinately late, but on the plus side, there wasn't much to clean up. Draco would generally eat leftovers when he got hungry later in the day, and would then make

something for the both of them to eat at dinner. At dinner, Harry would talk about his day, and Draco would listen. Then Harry would clean up the kitchen, while Draco sat nursing a cup of coffee still at the table. Harry claimed it was only fair that Draco relax while Harry cleaned, seeing as how Draco had cooked. While he washed, they talked about everything; they talked about nothing. They would talk about books, as Harry was getting good at bringing back library material of interest to Draco. They would talk about television programs, about the meal, about muggle inventions versus magical ones. Sometimes they wouldn't say anything at all and let the silence speak for them. Draco found himself looking forward to that part of the day almost more then any other.

As Draco washed out his coffee cup and set it to dry in the draining board, he was struck by just how domestic the action was. The old Draco would never have considered doing housework, and yet it had happened quite naturally – he preferred cooking in a clean kitchen, and he had more then enough free time on his hands to do the occasional act of dusting or vacuuming. What was more, he liked taking care of Harry. Draco scowled – he was getting far too sentimental for his tastes. If he had to go thinking about Harry all the time, the least he could do was think naughty, sexy thoughts, like any other normal eighteen-year-old. Yes, that was working. Harry taking off his shirt in the hallway earlier, baring that lovely chest that Draco was dying to get his hands on again. Harry bending over to tie his shoes, pulling his loose jeans snug over a backside that made Draco's pinch impulse return with a vengeance. Even the memory of the moan Harry had made when the coffee had touched his soft, pink lips, was enough to make Draco shiver deliciously.

Draco got a truly devious idea. Sure, Harry had said he wanted things to slow down, and since the massage altercation, things had been kept an even calm, but there was nothing saying that Draco couldn't at least *try* to seduce Harry. If the seduction didn't work, well then there was no harm done, and if it did work, then Harry would think it was all his idea in the first place. A shifty, cunning, smile adorned Draco's face; the kind-of smile that made other people wonder what you were up to. Harry would never know what hit him.

After showering, Draco stood in front of the slightly fogged bathroom mirror, a towel around his waist, and eyed himself critically. Because he had never truly been attracted to someone else before, it had never really entered into his mind that someone might be admiring his own appearance. Exploiting his ability to appeal to others physically was impossible because the concepts of lust and want were foreign to him. Or they had been until he had started drooling over Harry. Now he couldn't help wondering what Harry thought about him. From infancy, he had been told he was attractive, and it was something he had accepted without question, and he had never given it much thought. But *was* he attractive? And if so, how did he go about impressing this fact on certain oblivious, ebony-haired individuals?

In his mind's eye, he was too thin, too scraggly, and too pale. His chest was underdeveloped, and he was not yet back to the physique he had had at Hogwart's. Quidditch muscles were still apparent, but less defined, and his collarbones seemed to stick out oddly. His skin looked paper thin, so white that he could see small bluish veins running underneath it. Of course, he had always been rather wan – he did not tan, and even the hairs on his body were silvery-blonde,

almost invisible. Was that an attractive feature? It had always been more of an annoyance to Draco then anything else, as any bruises were highly visible, the blue-black and purple marks contrasting unpleasantly with his skin. As such, he had almost exclusively worn clothes that covered as much of him as possible. Perhaps that explained why he preferred winter to summer; the sweaters and slacks of winter were more flattering then the light, skin revealing, summertime fashions. Plus, summer had the added unpleasantness of forcing individuals to wear swim-shorts and to gather in public, sunlit places like the beach. Draco had forsworn the beach from an early age; having to wear a t-shirt at all times, and vast amounts of sunscreen, was not fun, and puberty, unfortunately, had come rather late to Draco Malfoy, and therefore comparisons became grossly unfair and rather damaging to the ego.

At least, he had ended up a decent height. Just slightly smaller in both stature and structure then Harry, he could still hold Harry without too much trouble, and without looking ridiculous. He supposed he also had nice legs, quite long in relation to the rest of his body, though his knees were too knobbly, and he had lost muscle tone there as well. Not that it was his fault he had been allowed but very minimal exercise during his imprisonment. He could see to rectifying that now, though there was only so much exercise he could do indoors. Could he go outside the flat? Just a little run around the block or something, he could handle that, couldn't he? Looking straight into the mirror he had to admit that he wasn't sure he could.

Growling at his reflection in frustration, he quickly got dressed, strode into the kitchen, and began to take out some of his excess stress on a poor lump of bread dough. Soon his anger was gone, and only the dejection he felt for not being able to conquer his fear remained. After finishing the dinner preparations to his satisfaction, Draco picked up Sherlock Holmes again, and sat outside on the balcony. Harry found him still sitting there when he came home that evening.

Beautiful was the only word Harry could think of. Black turtleneck sweater, grey slacks, blond hair falling over hooded, shadowy eyes; he managed to look strong yet vulnerable all at once. Drawn forward, Harry quietly approached the balcony. It wasn't until he slid open the glass door that Draco noticed his presence, and then Draco's guarded, melancholic expression changed to one of welcome, his grey eyes shifting from cold mist, to bright silver.

Draco was about to speak, but Harry was faster, covering his mouth with lips so achingly sweet that it shocked Draco into remaining perfectly still. Harry reached one hand under Draco's chin, tipping it upwards, leaning in still closer. Draco's shock at Harry's choice of greeting lasted only long enough for him to wrap his arms around Harry's neck, and then he was kissing back with equal passion. Harry knelt, making them level, both hands now curving gently around Draco's face to hold him in position. His tongue chased Draco's back and forth between their mouths, tasting and testing, coaxing and pressing. Draco could feel his heart trying to pound its way through his chest, felt his head go dizzy, and his skin start to tingle. Draco was pressed tightly between the wall and Harry's body; the former cold and hard, the latter hot enough to burn, gentle enough that Draco welcomed it regardless. Harry was bearing down on Draco's mouth with a possessiveness that neither had expected, but which neither wanted to deny. It seemed to last forever that kiss; a raging desire that continued its fevered pitch throughout it all, right up

until the end when Harry collapsed, his head dropping naturally to the crook of Draco's neck as he gasped for air. Harry felt Draco's hands in his hair and down his back, calming and protecting while they struggled for breath.

" Hello to you to," Draco said eventually, more then a little dazed. Draco was the one supposed to be doing the seducing, and yet here Harry comes and kisses the very soul from his body. Not that Draco minded, of course.

Harry raised his head, observing Draco's flushed face and dilated eyes. He smiled, and said bashfully, " I just really wanted to kiss you."

Draco placed a sweet kiss on Harry's swollen lips. " You never, ever, have to apologize for that," Draco said, voice huskier then usual. " Feel free to ravish me at any moment that is convenient for you."

" Now good?" Harry asked, eyes twinkling.

" Most certainly. Come here," Draco said, dragging Harry closer until he was sitting in Draco's lap. " Now I believe we were about here when we ran out of oxygen. Let's see how long we can make it last this time; I suggest taking a deep breath."

Draco's last coherent thought before his senses were thoroughly drugged by Harry's intoxicating mouth, was that if he didn't seduce Harry soon, he might never get the chance as Harry was doing a good enough job on his own. Not that Draco had a problem with that either.

It was sometime in the following week that Draco found himself pacing in front of the flat door, waiting for the slight ping of noise that would mean the lift was in use. Whatever reticence Draco and Harry might have shown initially in their relationship was being effectively replaced with a longing to touch, caress, and to just be as close as possible. The period of time that Harry needed before he became comfortable being touched was diminishing every day, and though they had kept to the 'above the belt' rule, there was no question that things were becoming hotter, their meetings more frequent, more hungry, and that it was getting increasingly difficult to stop.

They were changing in other ways as well. Though they went to bed with the majority of the mattress between them, they invariably woke up touching each other, possessive and protective even in sleep. Draco could not seem to keep his hands to himself, always finding excuses to run fingers through Harry's hair, to stroke his hand, or squeeze his shoulder. Harry's adjustment was to give Draco allowance to do this. Harry seemed to need to be around Draco more then usual. Whichever room Draco occupied, Harry would come and join him in, lugging in his books or his papers so that no matter what he had to do, he would still have Draco's presence near him. So Harry would sit nearby, and Draco would gravitate towards his warmth, fingers itching to touch and feel, and the result was usually them cozied up together in a tangle of limbs, all thoughts of accomplishing anything productive gone. Not a bad deal for Draco, who spent his days with nothing to do but anticipate Harry's return, but less effective for Harry who actually did have work he was expected to finish.

Draco's ears perked up at the almost imperceptible noise made by opening of the lift doors, and his attention became focussed on the fake wood grain pattern of the door. He heard footsteps approaching the front door, then the slight jingling of keys, and Draco reached eagerly for the doorknob, opening it before Harry had a chance to slide the key in the lock. Draco grabbed the front of Harry's shirt roughly, yanked him into the flat, shut the door, and then pushed Harry back against it.

If there had been any protest (and for the record, Harry was not at all about to dampen Draco's enthusiasm) it was cut short by Draco's mouth, as he attached himself to Harry in a welcome home that was becoming almost routine.

" You're late," Draco mumbled against Harry's lips, eyes closed, hands sliding under Harry's shirt with cool efficiency.

" I… had to… talk to some… not important… sorry," Harry stammered in between kisses. Draco didn't seem all that concerned about an apology anyway.

Harry began moving towards Draco's neck, licking and biting gently, an action he had first tried a few days earlier that hadn't failed yet to get Draco's attention. He felt Draco's arms wrap tightly around his shoulders, and he smirked knowing that the blond did that only when he felt his knees start to go weak.

" Damn," Draco said shakily, " You know what that does to me."

" It's why I do it," Harry said, coming back up to taste Draco's mouth. One of Draco's hands detached itself from Harry's shoulder, and returned to its former position under Harry's shirt. Draco had discovered Harry was more then a little bit ticklish, especially around his stomach, but that if you stroked him just right, you could get the most delightful moan. As though proving his point, Harry made a noise deep in his throat as Draco rubbed his fingers in a languid circle around Harry's navel. While Harry's mind was wrapped around that particular sensation, Draco reached up and gave Harry's nipple ring a gentle tug.

Harry's eyes flew open, and he broke off the kiss, to whine almost piteously, " Draco, you know what that does to me."

" It's why I do it," Draco echoed cheekily. Harry laughed. They broke apart then, though they continued to cast appreciative glances at each other throughout dinner and for the rest of the evening.

Harry was sitting at the kitchen table, several books open and book-marked with little yellow post-its, and several sheets of foolscap, some used and crumpled, others white and pristine, surrounding him. He had a term paper… well, it was actually several papers, due in the next little while, and he had been putting a lot of his university work on hold so he could have more 'quality' time with Draco. The previous term he had spent much more time actually at the

university, but now he was always in a hurry to come home. Unfortunately, his lack of preparation was beginning to show in his work.

Draco refilled Harry's coffee cup, and tried not to be a nuisance. He knew Harry had to work, but Draco went all day without him, and then not to talk or laugh with him in the evenings as well, was hard to take. Maybe if he had something else to do with his time… but no, there was nothing. Draco must have sighed, because Harry looked up from his paper, and caught the look in Draco's eyes.

" I really have to get this done," Harry said apologetically.

" Of course you do," Draco said, determined not to make Harry feel guilty. It was so entirely 'Harry' to take responsibility for things completely beyond his control. " I'm going to go take a bath and then probably go to bed after, unless you need me to do something?"

" Nope, I don't need you for anything," Harry said, his mind already back on his paper. He failed to see that Draco's expression had saddened at his off-hand remark.

Draco did take a bath, knowing that the tub was a good place to think, and the lock on the door gave a semblance of privacy that was hard to find elsewhere in the small place. His plans to bring the two of them closer were not only floundering, but also sinking them still further in the mire. For while they had certainly increased the number of times they were intimate, he knew each occasion was adding more pressure on Harry. Harry was stressed for time, and it was only going to get worse when finals arrived. Would it reach the point where Harry resented Draco being around? There was not much Draco could do to alleviate the strain. He couldn't go out, and when Harry was home, Draco didn't want to leave him alone. He felt neglected, he felt weak, he felt like he had nothing to offer, and the worst feeling of all, he felt that there was nothing he could do to change any of it.

The water had long since gone cold when he pulled himself out of the bath, and put on his pyjamas. He spared a glance at Harry, who was still seated at the kitchen table, one hand tugging at his hair, propping his head up, the other hand writing furiously. Draco went to bed, not bothering to say goodnight, as it would no doubt be ignored. He watched the red glowing numbers of the alarm clock as they changed minute by minute. It was past one when he heard Harry stumble into the bedroom. Draco felt the bed sag and the covers rearrange themselves. He fancied he even heard the slight click of Harry's glasses as he put them down on the bedside table, and turned off the light. Though Draco's back was to Harry, he still knew when Harry fell asleep. Draco remained awake long after, staring into nothingness.

The weeks that flew by for Harry, limped by for Draco. Harry was spending less and less time at home; frequently spending time at the university's libraries and utilizing something he called a computer. Draco grew quieter still, devouring books with a ferocity that went unnoticed. He had worked hard at giving Harry space to work, and he had succeeded. Perhaps too well, as he found that he was missing Harry even when they shared the same space.

" Hey Draco, I have to go to the university and type something out, do you want to come? It shouldn't take me long and you can take a look around if you want," Harry suggested. Harry made the offer because he knew that something was different in the household, and he didn't mean just the desperation he felt behind Draco's welcome home kisses. He didn't know what exactly was wrong, but he made a mental note to figure things out once exams were over.

Draco's expression could have lit up most of the dark ages. " Really? You mean it?"

" Whoa, it's just the university. Hardly thrilling, I can assure you."

Draco didn't waste time arguing with Harry, he just went and got his shoes. They decided to walk, and Draco kept turning this way and that, looking at all the curiosities on display under the bright sunlight. He wanted to ask a million questions, but Harry looked preoccupied, so he kept silent. He didn't know that his silence was making Harry upset.

Harry's university was quite large, or so Draco thought, with so many buildings, and corridors, and levels, he had to stick close to Harry or risk being lost. There were also a great number of students, despite the fact that it was Sunday, and Draco found himself people-watching with ever mounting interest. Every kind-of rebellion was on display, every lifestyle imaginable represented.

They entered a large room in the basement of one of the tall buildings. Its walls were painted a sterile white, the carpet utilitarian grey, and there were row upon row of buzzing white boxes.

" Telly?" Draco asked, puzzled.

" Not exactly. Computers," Harry said, signing his name to a sheet and finding himself an empty station. Draco sat perched with some trepidation on a torn orange chair that had small little wheels on the bottom that moved at the slightest provocation.

" What are they for?" Draco asked.

" Lots of things, I suppose. They're capable of holding a vast amount of information. An entire library, I suppose is the best analogy I can give you, at the touch of a button."

Harry tried to explain the various features of the computer, but though Draco appeared interested much of it was beyond him. Harry eventually had to get to work, and he set up his page and started typing.

" So it writes for you? How is that useful?"

" Well, once I've finished typing this, I can print it out on paper. Instead of having to rewrite my first draft over and over I can do it all at once, edit at will, and this way everything I hand in is legible. Its an awful lot faster," Harry replied. Draco bit his lip, as he could tell Harry was getting tired of answering his questions. Draco amused himself with the rolling chair, even more

impressed when he discovered he could spin on it.

" Must you?" Harry hissed at him. Stunned and more then a little hurt, Draco was about to reply with a scathing comment, when they were interrupted.

" I said exactly the same thing to Mike not thirty minutes ago," Tim said. He greeted Draco and Harry, and then sat himself down in front of the neighbouring computer. Tim glanced over at Harry's screen. " Hey, I have to do that also. I completely forgot about it, and nearly freaked when I found the assignment in my notes."

" Me too. Still, shouldn't take us too long to finish," Harry said. " Where's Mike?"

Tim shrugged, " Good question." Tim reached into his coat pocket and retrieved a slim black mobile phone. He hit a number, and waited for Mike to pick up. " Hey, where are you? I ran into Harry and Draco down in the east computer labs. Why don't you come meet us…"

The door to the computer lab swung open, and Mike paused slightly for dramatic effect in the doorway, before moving to join them.

" Ooh, what luck! And here I thought it was going to be a real bust of a day," Mike said loudly, completely ignoring the signs that requested the use of low voices. There were a few other students in the lab, but although they glared at the lively intrusion, Mike continued on in the same fashion, " Draco, did you know that you can spin in that chair?"

" Yes. I was told to stop acting like a child, however," Draco said, narrowing his eyes at Harry.

" Bah. Tim told me the same thing, which is why I left in the first place. But now I have you to keep me company, we can abandon Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Boring here, for something much more amusing. Can I have him please Harry? Pretty please?"

" Have him? What do you want to do with Draco?"

Mike opened his mouth wide, and Tim promptly clapped his hand over that mouth to stop what would have undoubtedly been an x-rated comment.

" What Mike means to say is that he would be happy to show Draco around the university while we work, isn't that right Mike?" Mike nodded his head. " And Mike is going to have Draco back safe and sound in about an hour, isn't he?" Again, Mike dutifully shook his head. " Finally, Mike is going to return Draco in the same condition he leaves in, meaning no tattoos, no alcohol, and no police records, am I correct?" Mike nodded, albeit a lot less enthusiastically then before. Tim released his grip over Mike's mouth, and Mike made an elaborate gesture of wiping at his face.

" Spoil sport," Mike muttered under his breath.

" What was that?" Tim asked.

Mike fluttered his eyelashes, " Just thinking how much I love you, sweetheart."

" I'll bet," Tim said. Mike tugged Draco out of his chair and began dragging him towards the door. Harry stood up to protest.

" Wait, Draco you don't have to go if you don't want to," Harry said gently.

" I'll be fine," Draco bit out. Mike and Draco left, and Harry could only stare after them nervously.

" What's the matter? Mike won't really make a move on Draco, you know that."

" It's not that, it's just that I've gotten used to always knowing where he is, you know?"

" No. Possessive much?" Tim asked rhetorically. Harry shrugged and turned back to his work. He found concentration was difficult, and it was taking him forever to do the simplest of tasks. He couldn't help wondering if Draco was having fun without him. What is Draco was scared? What if Draco decided he was tired of depending on Harry? What if Draco realized he didn't really need Harry at all?

Harry stood up suddenly.

" You finished already?"

" No, can you ring Mike please? Find out where they are?"

" I'm sure they're fine…"

" Please Tim?"

" If you're sure," Tim said, dialling the number, and talking briefly when Mike picked up.

" Come on, I'll go with you," Tim said. They hurried out of the computer lab, and up the stairs out onto the open campus. " They're in the athletics centre."

It only took a few minutes to reach their destination, but it was enough to make Harry frantic. He couldn't seem to shake the feeling that something was wrong. Harry had long ago given up trying to rationalize his instincts, as they usually turned out to be true. Draco and Mike were sitting in a section of deserted bleachers. Mike was staring with unabashed interest at the male members of the university's swim team. Draco's eyes were focussed on his feet, and his hands were clenched tightly on the bench. To any passer-by, Draco looked bored; to Harry, he looked terrified.

At their approach, two heads swivelled in their direction. Mike broke into an easy grin. Draco leapt out of his seat and ran straight into Harry's arms. Harry almost toppled over backwards due to the onslaught, but managed to right himself, and hold on tightly to the trembling blond.

" I tried, I really tried," Draco mumbled disconsolately in Harry's ear.

Harry stroked his back in what he hoped was a soothing manner. " It's okay."

Draco could actually feel tears pricking the corners of his eyes, and he was disgusted with himself. There was no way he was going to cry, especially not here.

" Can we go home now?"

" Yes, right now," Harry assured. Harry nodded at Mike and Tim, and then steered Draco towards the entrance.

" Well, that was odd," Mike said, after Harry and Draco were out of earshot.

" What did you do to him?" Tim accused, arms crossed, voice stern.

" Nothing! I swear. I mean I was planning on… I mean, nothing at all."

Tim seemed unconvinced. Mike stood up and threw himself at his boyfriend.

" Oof!" Tim exclaimed, wrapping his arms instinctively around the smaller man. " What was that for?"

" It worked so well for Draco, that I just figured I'd try it. Will you take me home now as well?"

" I thought you had homework too?"

" Homework? Never touch the stuff myself," Mike said, shuddering as though he had come close to something distasteful.

" Ah, you may joke, but I know I'm dating a closet-nerd," Tim said. " Come on, one hour in the library then we'll split, I promise."

Mike pouted but to no avail.

" Draco, talk to me," Harry pleaded, as they entered the flat some time later.

" What should I say? You were right, I was wrong. Boo hoo, poor Draco. Can we drop this already?" Draco sniped.

" I don't see why you're so mad at me. I told you didn't have to go with Mike."

" Oh yes, I forgot; that ever so kind invitation," Draco said sarcastically, arms crossed over his chest angrily.

" What? This is my fault?" Harry said, his voice getting louder. They had shed their coats and shoes and were now standing in the living room, glaring at each other.

" Did you have to be so damn patronizing? In front of your friends even? I feel like your watching everything I do when we go out. I don't need a bloody babysitter!"

" So throwing yourself at me after about fifteen minutes on your own, that was the picture of mental health?" Harry said, tone scathing.

" I knew it! That really is what you think, isn't it? That I'm pathetic, a loser who can't do anything!"

Harry winced, " I never said anything like that!"

" You didn't have to. You think I don't see it? The pitying looks, the sighs you make when you wish I would just go away?"

" Well maybe if you weren't ALWAYS here then I might actually miss you. I gave you that key to the flat, and its still there; you haven't even touched it! What do you do all day, sit around and wait for me to come home and entertain you? I can't even get through the door without you trying to maul me," Harry yelled at him.

The moment he had spoken, the very second the utterance had trickled past his lips, Harry regretted it. He saw the unbelievable amount of hurt that flashed in Draco's eyes, only to be masked unsuccessfully with anger.

" Well rest assured I won't be making that mistake again. I should have realized that even if I wasn't so fucked up in the head; I still wouldn't be good enough for Saint Potter. Tell you what, I'll go kill myself and solve both our problems," Draco cried out. He shoved Harry once and then fled, wanting to get out, wanting to just get away.

Harry's hand latched on strongly to his wrist. " Don't. Please, don't."

" Don't what Harry?"

" Don't leave me," Harry said piteously. He didn't understand why they were fighting, what had made him say the things he had. He just knew he was sorry, and terrified that this meant it was all over.

" But don't you remember, Potter? I'm a useless, joke of a human being. I can't leave," Draco said bleakly, before jerking his wrist free. Harry flinched when he heard the bathroom door slam

shut. He let himself sink down onto the carpet, cradling his head in his hands.

Draco paced the two and a half steps the small bathroom allowed, his fists clenched, and his head turned up towards the ceiling. He tried to breath deeply and evenly, but his breath hitched in his throat. That laboured breath was soon followed by another, and then another, until he was wheezing and choking, every breath a struggle. Unable to get past the lump in his throat, he was forced to sit down. His eyes were burning, and he pressed his face to the cool tile of the floor. It didn't help.

He hadn't cried when his father had disowned him for choosing not to follow Voldemort, he hadn't cried when his father had taken him home and nobody had helped him, he hadn't cried when he was locked away and beaten, he hadn't cried when his mother died.

He was crying now.

What had been done to him wasn't fair, but he could put it behind him, if only it was over. But it wasn't over; it was still wreaking havoc on his life, keeping him from the one thing above all others that he wanted. He wanted to be with Harry, and he wanted to be worthy of that relationship. He was the way he was, and he couldn't play any position but that of an equal with Harry. But who was he now? Where was he going?

" I'm nobody," Draco muttered, closing his eyes, and relaxing against the hard floor, too exhausted to move.

The hours passed and silence reigned. Harry three times approached the bathroom door, once going so far as to raise his hand to knock, but in the end, he would always falter and leave the words unspoken. Day grew into evening, and evening to night, and still they stayed in their respective spaces, not even thinking anymore, just laying listlessly. It was very late when Harry roused himself and decided to go to bed. Dressed in his pyjamas, he finally summoned up the courage to knock.

" Draco? I'm going to bed, you can come out if you want." Silence greeted him. " Please, you can't stay in there all night, even if you do hate me now." He could hear sounds as someone moved, but Draco didn't speak. Harry sighed in resignation, and headed for his bedroom.

" I'm sorry Harry," Draco whispered.

" I'm sorry Draco," Harry said, once within the confines of his room. Neither one heard the apologies.

The next morning Harry awoke with a pounding headache. It took him a few minutes to adjust to wakefulness, and still longer to pinpoint the reason for his sense of unease. What was different was that his bed was empty; he hadn't realized how accustomed he had become to waking up with Draco next to him. He supposed it was like anything else, you don't notice something until it's gone. Gone. The word sent tremors down Harry's back, and he quickly got

out of bed. The bathroom door was open, and Harry took the few steps to the living room with undo haste, nearly tripping on the carpet. Draco wasn't there anyway, and he had already ascertained that the kitchen was empty. Harry closed his eyes and tried to pretend he could still hear the sounds of someone making breakfast for him. The illusion wouldn't come; his mind wouldn't be tricked for it craved the real thing.

Still not really believing what all five senses were telling him, he strode into the hallway and checked the front door. Draco's coat and shoes were gone. The little ledge where the spare keys to the flat were kept was bare. For the first time that morning, Harry felt a little bit of hope. If Draco had taken the keys, surely he was intending to come back? Then his spirits crashed again. Maybe he was waiting for Harry to leave so that he could come back and collect the rest of his stuff.

Harry took the red mittens that rested on the closet shelf, and hid them in the pockets of his jacket. If Draco came back, he wouldn't be getting the mittens, Harry decided. He knew it was petty, but he was a little desperate. He couldn't believe that Draco was actually gone. He got dressed slowly and methodically, letting his body run on automatic. He had already missed his first class, and it didn't look like he was going to make his second. He had never felt so tired in his entire life, and his headache was only getting worse.

Finally he made it out of the flat, and down the stairs to the street. His mind was elsewhere so it was only chance that kept him from stepping on Draco. Draco looked up at him from his seat on the bottom stair, his face devoid of expression. He went back to staring at the cars that were passing by.

" You need a cigarette," Harry said quietly.

" Hmm?"

" Sitting here, it just seems you need a cigarette dangling from your mouth, or something," Harry said haltingly.

" I'll take that into consideration," Draco replied coolly.

Harry took a seat next to him, feeling the cold from the stone step leeching into his body. How long had Draco been sitting here? While not exactly cold out, it wasn't the kind-of weather that encouraged lingering outdoors.

" You really scared me. I thought I'd never see you again," Harry said, voice wavering slightly.

" Yeah well, let me put your mind at ease. This is as far as I got," Draco said caustically. He kicked at an errant stone with his shoe. " This stupid stoop is as far as I fucking got. I hate it, Harry. I can bloody well see the street in front of me, I know there's nobody that can hurt me, and I still can't do it. It's ridiculous, it's absurd, and I hate it. I'm a prisoner, and this time it's me who's the jailer as well."

" Draco," Harry began slowly, " All that stuff you said yesterday, you don't really believe that's what I think, do you?" Draco didn't answer, but he didn't have to. The answer was written all over his face. " Because I don't. I think your smart, I think your strong, I think… Draco I look forward to coming home everyday because I know you'll be there, and I'm sorry if for one second I made you think that wasn't true."

Harry reached up and stroked the back of Draco's head, letting his fingers slide through the strands of his hair.

" It's what I think that's the problem," Draco said softly. " I don't feel like myself anymore. Well, sometimes I do. But then I keep getting into these situations where I realize just how dependent on you I am. And one day you'll realize that, and I'll have nothing at all."

" That's why I've been pushing you to get out more. Believe me, I would like nothing better then to keep you away in that flat all to myself, so that you won't ever find someone better then me, but I can't do that because it's too selfish. I remember what you were like in school – so much ambition and confidence. I don't want you giving up because of what Voldemort and your father did to you."

" What if I don't think I'm ready?" Draco asked. " Is this it? The end?"

Harry leaned towards him and pulled him into a hug. It took a moment, but Draco eventually turned into the embrace, finding a comfortable position.

" Draco, I didn't mean you had to start right away. In fact, if you try, and you find out that there's nothing worth having out there, that's fine too. I just don't want you to one day resent me for holding you back. That's all I was trying to say, but unfortunately I handled the situation with my usual tact and diplomacy."

" Zero tact and sensitivity," Draco retorted, some of the colour coming back into his voice.

" I admit it, I'm a moron."

Draco sighed, " And I'm a freak. I was so mad at you this morning that I was going to storm off into the sunset and never look back. I couldn't believe it when I only got this far. Thanks for not laughing when you found me."

" We see things differently, I guess. You see how close you are to the flat, I see how far. It's an improvement," Harry said.

" Yeah for me," Draco said, unenthusiastically.

" Oh you'll be out all day and all night before you know it. And I'll be sitting at home, worrying, wondering 'why doesn't he call'?" Harry said, voice melodramatic. Draco laughed.

" Speaking of mother inspired nagging, shouldn't you be at school young man?" Draco asked, standing up and brushing himself off. He held out a hand to Harry and helped the other young man to his feet.

" Yes, I should. I just wanted to make sure we were okay. We are okay, aren't we?"

Draco tucked a wind blown strand of black hair behind Harry's ear, and placed a kiss on his mouth.

" We're good," Draco replied.

" Good," Harry said, pausing to give Draco a more passionate kiss. " You going to go back inside now? You're frozen."

" I think I'll stay awhile longer and admire my progress," Draco drawled.

Harry shrugged, and turned to go. He suddenly twisted around, a strange expression on his face,

" Draco?"

" Yes?"

" Go out with me? I mean, like a real date, with me?"

Harry looked rather adorable, face flushed, and his hands twisting nervously. Draco could have made a joke, but he didn't.

" I'd like that. Where will we go?"

" I figured we would be totally cliché, and go for dinner and a movie. Why mess with tradition, right?"

" I've never been to a movie," Draco supplied.

" Really? Never?" Draco shook his head no. " Oh. Do you think you could forget that I said it was a cliché first date thing to do? Because then I could make you believe that I was oh so clever for having thought of it."

" I can't do that, Harry."

" Damn."

" If it helps, I'd never have thought of you as clever anyway," Draco said, smirk in place.

" My boyfriend, ladies and gentleman, my boyfriend," Harry said. He kissed Draco once more on the cheek before hopping off the last step happily, and walking away. With luck, he would make his third and final class of the day.

Draco stared after him, beginning to feel the cool of the step under his feet, and the bite of the wind. Not that it detracted much from his pleasant mood. His boyfriend Harry, he mused. He liked the sound of that. And, he thought, smile descending into its more familiar smirk, surely the presents got better now that they were dating?

Ugh, I know, but it had to handled, no? Still encouragement would be much appreciated. I will try to have the next chapter out early in the New Year, and believe me you'll want to read that one. To whet the appetite (and stimulate some responses): say goodbye to the 'above the belt' rule.

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Chapter: 9

Hi! Here it is, right on time as promised. You have no idea how hard this was to write! Hope it was worth it. I hate that I have to do this, but it seems expected that I warn you that in this chapter there will be some mention of sex – I hardly expect anyone to freak out if they've come this far, but now you can't say I didn't give fair warning. It's more suggestive, then explicit, but my intention is not to offend. Also, if someone does complain and I get kicked off , I am now posted at both the Potter Slash Archive (PSA) and Pure Magnetism, where I'm sure such biased censorship doesn't exist. Enjoy!

Harry stood outside the front door of his flat, intentionally jangling his keys noisily. Moving slowly he put the key in the lock, turning it reluctantly, hoping that at any moment the door would swing open and admit him. It didn't. Harry had to reach for the handle and twist it. Even once he was inside and the door locked behind him, he took his time untying his shoes and hanging up his coat in the hall closet. Still nothing. Harry sighed.

Since their fight, Draco hadn't met him at the door and he hadn't initiated any other amorous encounters. Harry knew it was entirely because of what he had said during their argument, about how Draco was coming on too strong. What had possessed him to disparage the way in which Draco welcomed him home? Oh yeah, because he didn't trust things that made him so happy. And it was a well-established fact that forgiving was a long ways from forgetting. 'God,' Harry thought, 'who needs enemies when I'm so good at ruining my life myself?'

Draco was in the living room, forcing himself to remain seated. He would wait for Harry to come to him, but did Harry have to take so damn long? How long did it take to remove a pair of shoes anyway? Then Harry was there, standing in the doorway, and all recriminations were put

on hold. Harry grinned, Draco's smile widened.

" Good day?"

" Better now," Harry replied, and flopped onto the couch next to Draco. Draco returned his attention to his book, inordinately pleased when he felt Harry shift closer. Harry lay down on his side, his head coming to rest in Draco's lap. Draco's hand dropped to stroke through Harry's hair, and Harry let out a sigh of contentment.

They ate late that night; neither had wanted to get off the couch and disturb the peaceful scene. Conversation remained light and teasing, touches were subtle but frequent. Harry instigated the first kiss, but it was Draco who encouraged it to go to a deeper level of passion. They were sitting on the couch again, and Draco had just slid into Harry's lap, knees on either side of Harry's hips. Harry undid the top button of Draco's shirt, pulling the fabric back slightly until he could freely trace Draco's collarbone with his lips.

Draco tilted his head upwards, giving Harry better access. His voice was breathy when he spoke, " We are really, really, proficient at kissing. Did you know that?"

Harry grinned against Draco's skin, " If you say so."

" I do say so. We started off as slobbering idiots – well, compared to now that is." Draco had to pause when Harry licked a particularly sensitive place on his neck. He visibly shivered, then continued, " But we're practically gods at it now. I mean it Harry - you're really brilliant at the kissing. There ought to be a contest or something, we could make a fortune."

" Would you talk the whole way through that as well?" Harry teased.

Draco blushed, " Just wanted you to know is all."

" Well thanks, but if you don't mind it takes two people to kiss properly, and I'd hate for us to lose our edge," Harry said, bringing his mouth back towards Draco's tempting swollen lips.

" No fear of that. We really are fucking fantastic," Draco said. He proceeded to ravish Harry's mouth, proving his statement, over and over again.

Draco glanced at the clock on the wall, wondering where Harry was. Normally he was home from school well before this time. Draco knew it was irrational to worry about a delay of only an hour, but he was apprehensive just the same. Part of it was because he knew that if Harry seriously was in trouble, there was little that Draco could do about it, stuck as he was in the flat by his own bloody fears. Another hour rolled by when finally Draco heard the front door opening.

" Sorry I was late, I had to do something," Harry said. Draco shrugged, trying to not let on how upset he had been. " I got you a present."

Draco's ears perked up, and he gave Harry his full attention.

" Really? What is it?"

" Before you open it, you should know that I've been doing some thinking," Harry stated.

" Will wonders never cease," Draco gibed.

Harry ignored him, " And I was thinking that it's probably really hard not to have anything magical around you anymore, so I, uh, went to Diagon alley, and got you some stuff. Nearly made it out unrecognized too, but I then got mobbed by these irritating girls…"

Draco leapt off the couch, noticing for the first time the lipstick stains on Harry's collar, and the faint smell of some cloying perfume.

" You mean they touched you? How dare they! Tramps," Draco said. He was pulling Harry's shirt off rather roughly, wanting to destroy any trace of there being someone else's hands on what he considered to be his private domain.

" 'Tramps' is a bit harsh. They were quite nice, really," Harry said, amused at Draco's possessive streak.

" Whores then," Draco spit out, successfully removing Harry's shirt. " Right, anything else they touched?"

Harry was tempted to say his pants, just to see if Draco would strip him of those as well with the same enthusiasm, but decided that in the state Draco was in, serious damage could be done.

" No, though they did breathe on me rather strongly. Think you could kiss me…"

No sooner asked then answered. Draco wrapped his arms around Harry's bare chest, squeezing tightly, his lips firmly pressed to Harry's.

" Better?"

" Much."

" Now, what were you doing in Diagon alley if not picking up strange women," Draco said. He had planned on letting Harry go, but something about a shirtless Harry made such an action impossible.

" Getting you a gift, like I said," Harry said. He detached himself from Draco's death-grip, and retrieved a brown paper bag. " It's mostly books, spells and such, that I thought maybe you might want to study. Plus, exploding snap, chocolate frogs, and a quill and ink."

" Stupid quill," Draco muttered.

Harry's eyebrows lifted in surprise, " Why Draco, are you admitting that the Muggle world actually has benefits over the magical one?"

" Actually, I've come to the decision that we're really not that different at all. Different responses to similar problems… But I want my present, please?"

" And now he's saying please," Harry muttered. " You'd think I would have noticed hell freezing over."

" Shut-up. Present," Draco demanded.

Harry shoved the bag at Draco, who delved into it happily. Standard book of spells, years six and seven, sweets, common potion ingredients, and a cauldron, made up most of the contents.

" I didn't get you a wand. I wasn't sure if that was allowed or not. I've never been too clear on the underage use of magic rules. I mean, are we still underage because neither of us graduated?"

" We're eighteen, so we're not underage. But because we didn't graduate, we won't be allowed to practice magic unless under the supervision of another trained witch or wizard. So it's good you didn't get me a wand – it would have been too tempting. Besides, most magic can be traced, and I don't fancy a visit by my dear old papa," Draco replied, scowling.

Harry was worried his gift had been a bad idea, " I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have done this. But I know you feel kind-of like you're drifting, and I thought you might like to study magic. You were always a good student, and I don't want you to have to give up everything."

" No, the gift is great, thank you. It will be good to get some practice in and I have to admit that when I arrived I was kind-of surprised there was nothing to do with magic here. I would have expected you to have kept a few things," Draco said. He knew he was entering dangerous territory, and he just hoped Harry didn't get too defensive.

Harry dragged out his travel truck from its corner, and flipped the lid. " If any of this stuff helps, you have my permission to use it. But Draco, there's a lot of bad stuff that I've finally managed to put behind me, and I'd rather not dredge any of it up again, okay?"

" Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

" Very sure," Harry said. And the funny thing was, Harry really was certain this time. The past couldn't really hurt him anymore; Draco's presence only confirmed that. Today, when he had gone to Diagon alley for the first time in over a year, there had been none of the usual fear and anger. It was just a place, somewhere he used to know, and somewhere he could still visit if he wanted.

" Okay, I won't ask any questions."

" Oh, you can ask, but I don't guarantee that I'll answer, is that fair?"

Draco nodded, and began sifting through some of Harry's old belongings. It was more intimate then he had expected. It was a little like getting a peek into someone else's mind, and he felt privileged that Harry was giving him this freedom. He picked up Harry's yearbook from the third year, reading a few of the comments that his friends had written on the inside of the cover. There were the usual 'have a nice summer', and 'see you next year' comments. He was surprised to find a comment written by none other then himself. It read 'Just remember that you suck, Potter'. Draco showed it to Harry, and they laughed.

" You were such a prat, it's almost unbelievable," Harry said, smiling.

" I know. And so short," Draco said, coming across a group photo in which he was considerably smaller then his classmates. Harry pointed to himself in the photo, situated on the complete other side of the group.

" You're not the only one. Thank God we grew, huh? I mean, Hermione was taller then me for crying out loud."

" You were a rather cute kid, wonder what happened?" Draco asked, pondering innocently. Harry growled, and tackled him to the floor. Harry straddled Draco's narrow waist, effectively pinning Draco's hands to his sides, and kissed him until Draco retracted his comment.

" So, like all good boyfriends, you have now bought me a present. When will the promised date occur?"

" Friday. I thought I told you already? Anyway, I booked the night off work and everything."

" Well gee Harry, you might have told me. That doesn't give me much time to prepare."

" It's totally casual Draco, you don't need to dress-up."

" Whatever you say," Draco said. In his mind he was already making plans. The devilish tilt to his eyebrows made Harry start to worry.

Despite Harry's insistence that their Friday night date was a simple affair, Draco still spent most of Friday afternoon deciding what to wear. He really didn't have that many clothes, so the choice should have been easy, and yet… Finally deciding that black really was his colour; he slipped on black jeans, and a slinky, long-sleeved black shirt, and studied the effect. He hoped the subtlety wouldn't be lost on Harry. He took the outfit off again, and went to take a shower. Clean and freshly scrubbed, Draco stepped into his clothes, and combed back his wet hair. There was nothing to do now but wait, and Draco cursed both his organizational skills (he was about

four hours early) and his inherent lack of patience.

When Harry did come home, he tossed out his usual greeting and continued on to the kitchen, before doing an about face, and coming back to stare at Draco.

" Eep," Harry said.

" Why thank you, that was precisely the look I was going for," Draco said smugly.

" Ork," Harry retorted nonsensically.

" I think you already established that, but thanks just the same. One can never have too many compliments. I laid out some clothes for you to wear, and I don't want you complaining – no boyfriend of mine is going out looking scruffy."

" Gah," Harry said, nodding so that Draco would understand him. Still dazed, Harry went to get changed, putting on clean blue jeans, and a white button-down shirt. Harry was fully aware he was grinning like an idiot, but it didn't seem very important. Not when he had a date with that damn cocky bastard in the next room.

They had dinner at a small restaurant near the university that Harry knew of. It was a reasonably priced family run place, with plastic tablecloths, cheap décor, poor lighting, and fantastic food. Everything from chow mein to cereal was on the menu, though Harry recommended the Italian dishes. Draco had the angel-hair pasta – Harry thought it necessary to point out the irony.

" Um, I'd recommend dessert, the chocolate cake here is really good, but then we might miss the movie," Harry said after they had stuffed themselves full of satisfying carbohydrates.

Draco took a sip from his glass, and dabbed at his mouth with a paper napkin. " I don't think I could eat another bite anyway."

Harry looked at Draco's plate, which still had a great deal of pasta on it. Teasing slightly, he mocked, " Amateur."

" Trying to keep my figure just the way you like it. You remember? The stellar comments of 'eep' and 'gah'?" Draco replied.

Harry flushed red enough to match the wine, and Draco laughed. They were rather noisy while they waited in the queue outside the movie theatre. A few people were listening in to their conversation, enjoying the fast-paced insults and retorts, especially since it was obvious the intent was humour, not harm.

The theatre itself was full, and they took seats side-by-side near the back. Draco was too intently involved in his conversation with Harry to think much about anything else, so when the

lights dimmed at the film's commencement, he was startled. He soon found the darkness comforting, the atmosphere one of pleasant anticipation.

Harry had tried to explain what to expect, eventually coming up with the description 'really big telly', but Draco discovered it was much more then that. He was enthralled by the whole experience. He was leaning forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, eyes wide in the darkness, when he noticed that there were quite a few couples more interested in each other then the film. Glancing at Harry, who was absorbed in watching the screen, he couldn't help wondering if maybe they were supposed to be doing other… stuff. The movie, however, drew his attention again and he forgot all about Harry for the remainder of the show.

" So what did you think? It looked like you were half asleep," Harry asked, when they were walking home from the theatre.

" Asleep? Are you kidding? It was fantastic! I mean, the movie was sort-of lame and I figured out in the first five minutes who the murderer was, but that chase bit with the automobiles, and then when he shot that guy, and did that thing, and then that other thing. And it was like 'whoa' but then like 'yeah', and…"

Harry couldn't help laughing at Draco's description of the film. His laughter didn't deter Draco from talking, however, and they were nearly back to the flat when Draco finally stopped for air. " Oh, and I meant to ask, are you ashamed of me?"

" Excuse me?" Harry asked, completely thrown by the sudden change in subject.

" Well, in the theatre, there were people kissing, and others with their arms around each other, or holding hands, and I was kind-of wondering why we didn't do anything like that."

" You wanted to hold my hand?" Harry asked sceptically.

" Ug, don't be daft, I don't do that kind-of crap unless it's to my benefit. In fact, I don't really believe in public displays of affection – some things should be kept private. But you didn't even *try* anything, so I was just wondering… is it because we were the only two guys together on a date?"

" Well sort-of…" Harry began.

" So am I expected to pretend whenever we're in public? Because let me tell you I don't fade into the shadows very easily," Draco huffed.

" Draco wait," Harry said, catching hold of Draco's arm. They stood facing each other under a streetlight. " I'm not ashamed of you, and I'm not ashamed of us. It's just that I'm used to my whole life being up for grabs; anything important to me soon becomes something for the public to feast on. I guess I'm used to keeping things private, and, yes, even secret. I don't like the thought of sharing you with anyone else. I want to keep you mine. All mine."

Harry was blushing even as he was talking. He was stroking the side of Draco's face, trying to make Draco understand what he was saying. When they were alone together, their moments were special, and he didn't want anyone else cheapening those experiences.

" That is quite possibly the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me," Draco said, still somewhat stunned. He pressed his mouth eagerly to Harry's, and was pleased with the immediate reciprocation. " If I'm yours, then you're mine, got that? You belong to me."

Harry simply deepened the kiss, bringing them closer together with his arms. One of Draco's hands slid under Harry's shirt, touching the bare skin of his back. The other arm was draped around Harry's neck, keeping Draco from falling should his knees give out. It was just that type of kiss. Harry's hands were against the small of Draco's back, then resting on his hips, and finally his hands drifted lower, curving over Draco's bottom.

Draco's eyes widened, and he broke out of the kiss. " Harry, your hands are on my butt, I thought we had a rule about that?"

Harry's brain took a long time returning to reality, but when it did, he was as surprised as Draco.

" Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to, it just sort-of happened," Harry stammered, removing his hands. There was an awkward moment, as Harry tried to step away but Draco was still holding onto him tightly.

" It's okay," Draco said, and attempted to continue the kiss. Harry let himself be swept up again by the sensations, and after a few nervous moments, found a safe place for his hands on Draco's shoulders.

" Wait!" Draco said suddenly.

" What? They're nowhere near your butt, I swear," Harry exclaimed.

" Just let me get this straight, your hands were on my butt?"

" Yes, and I'm sorry…"

" And I made you move them?" Draco asked incredulously.

" Yes," Harry replied, no longer sure where Draco was going with his questioning.

" I am such an idiot – or maybe I've been hanging around you too long. Anyway, I take it back," Draco said.

" Huh? Take what back?" Harry asked.

" Whatever I said that made you remove your hands. I take it back," Draco said imperiously.

" Okay, so what does that mean?"

" Put your hands on my ass, Potter," Draco said through gritted teeth. Harry wavered; suddenly shy. " Now!"

Harry's hands shot down faster then he thought they were capable of moving. Harry thought that maybe in his excitement he may have gripped a little too hard, but Draco didn't seem to mind. In fact, Draco was smirking, pleased to have gotten his way. Harry squeezed, and Draco jumped. The smirk was gone.

" Now where were we?" Harry asked rhetorically.

" You do know that this abolishes that pesky 'below the belt' rule, don't you?" Draco said, determined to have the last word. Draco took advantage of Harry's speechlessness to kiss him thoroughly, and prevent any further discussion on the subject.

Nearly a week went by of blissful kisses and shameless groping. Draco was pleased with the amount of progress they were making. Harry's freak-outs were coming less regularly, and Draco made it a point to go out everyday and sit on the front steps.

That night, however, for the first time in a long time, Draco had a nightmare. In the dream, Draco was standing in the doorway of the flat. Just outside the door, beyond his reach, stood his father and Harry. Lucius had his arm wrapped tightly around Harry's neck in a stranglehold, his other hand held a wand pointed at Harry's temple. Harry was crying gently, reaching out for Draco, and mouthing words that Draco couldn't hear. Draco was yelling too, telling Harry it was going to be okay, but it was one of those soundless dreams where you can't even hear your own screaming voice. Then Harry's arm gave up, and fell listlessly to his side. Draco could save Harry, that much he knew for certain. He only had to cross through the doorway and everything would be resolved. But then, this wasn't a dream, it was a nightmare, and Draco was stuck to the floor, unable to move. Harry's eyes were closing, and he was beginning to slump to the floor. Lucius was laughing evilly and soundlessly, and Draco couldn't even get far enough outside to touch Harry one last time. There was a horrid flash of green from Lucius's wand, and then Draco woke-up.

Draco was breathing hard, the sheets twisted around his hands. He looked over at Harry, startled to see two luminous eyes staring back at him. The sense of relief Draco felt was almost palpable. He let his head fall back against the pillow, and stared up at the ceiling, struggling to gain control over his racing heart. Draco doubted very much that he was going to fall asleep again any time soon. The dream was still too fresh in his mind, and too realistic. A warm arm slipped over his chest and gripped his side.

" Harry, what are you doing? I have a reputation as an unfeeling and untouchable prick to maintain," Draco said, even as he stroked Harry's arm, assuring himself that Harry was still very

much alive.

" I won't tell if you don't," Harry said sleepily. Harry drew himself up the bed, until he was curled against Draco. Draco turned onto his side, and they fit themselves together, with Draco's back to Harry's chest, and both Harry's arms wrapped comfortingly around Draco's slightly shaking form.

" Goodnight then," Draco said, snuggling closer into Harry's seemingly endless supply of heat. Harry didn't respond as he had already fallen back asleep.

In the morning, Harry was yet again running late, and his panicked ramblings and fumblings provided an interesting foil to Draco's calm and cool behaviour.

" I have to go straight from school to work, so I won't see you until quite late. You'll be okay?"

" I'll be fine. What about you? You don't have time for breakfast, I know you don't eat lunch, and now you'll be working through dinner. Promise me you'll stop somewhere and get something to eat?"

" I will, I promise," Harry said, kissing Draco on the cheek and grabbing his keys.

" And I don't mean just coffee," Draco yelled after him. He heard Harry grumble something about coffee being a perfectly good meal substitute, and then the door was closed, and Harry was gone.

The dream haunted Draco all through the morning. He kept seeing the resigned look on Harry's face, as though he knew that Draco couldn't, wouldn't, save him in time. It sent shivers down Draco's spine. He didn't want that dream to have any possibility of coming of true. It wasn't his style to skulk in the backgrounds… well, actually that was exactly his style, but it wasn't where Harry was concerned. He was Harry's protector, he remembered. Perhaps it was time he proved it.

Having made his decision, he was determined to put it into action as soon as possible. He ran through a mental list of the things he had to do. One: look after Harry properly. And that was all. Draco couldn't help thinking that it wasn't much of a list, so he added one more item. Two: get into Harry Potter's pants. Yes, that was much better. But first things first, if Draco was truly going to protect Harry he would have to be able to leave the house.

Draco spent the afternoon in the kitchen cooking, knowing that no matter what Harry promised his meals for the day would consist of coffee, coffee, and some coffee. At six o'clock, Draco put the last of his prepared food into some plastic containers (plastic was fantastic stuff, Draco decided), snapped the lids shut, put them carefully in a bag, and set the bag by the door. He was shaking as he tied his shoes. He had to take two steadying breaths before he could even reach for his coat. Draco tried to move faster, so the experience would be over sooner, but the haste made him clumsy, and he had to slow down again. With the bag of food in one hand, Draco

reached for the keys to the flat, and stepped out the front door.

The first trial was over with, but now he faced the second. The stairs. He was tempted to simply sit on the bottom step, as had been his habit for the past few days, but he couldn't. The food was getting cold, he told himself, and he stepped resolutely onto the sidewalk.

Draco could hear his pulse beating like mad, the blood rushing through his veins so fast it was almost as though it wanted to escape his skin, and go back into hiding. Hiding sounded so good right now. Crawling into bed and throwing the covers over his head even better, but his steps continued onward, his mind shouting out the directions to the bookstore in a panicked voice. He still gripped the keys in his hand, clutching them so tightly that the metal was sure to leave indents on his palm. Draco didn't look back when he turned the street corner – he knew that if he saw the flat he would go running straight back to it.

The shadows seemed longer in this next block, and there were people. A man with a briefcase just barely brushed by him, and Draco dropped his gaze to his shoes. One foot, then the other - the rise and fall. ' Every step brings me closer to Harry', Draco thought, and kept moving. Streets, crossings, cars, people, and then at last the bookshop, its little sign flapping in the wind, beckoning him forward, telling him he had made it. His pace increased automatically, until he was speeding his way to the doorway, pushing open the door with greater force then was necessary. The shop was nearly empty; the bells over the lintel rang loud in the stillness.

Green eyes turned towards him, the emotion in them flitting by to quickly for Draco to decipher. Not that he could feel anything beyond an almost crippling relief at having Harry in his sight again.

" I brought you something, figured you might be hungry," Draco said softly. Harry was across the small shop in moments, crushing Draco to him in a hug that would probably cause bruises.

" How? Why?" Harry began but soon had to give up. He went back to holding Draco close, nearly lifting the man off his feet. Draco buried his head against Harry's shoulder and breathed in the familiar smell. Harry pulled back, placing a small kiss on Draco's mouth. " Does it sound horribly trite for me to say that I am so proud of you?"

" A little," Draco murmured, then he confessed, " But I'm rather proud of me too."

Suddenly there was a blinding bright flash. For one horrible moment, Harry thought it was Colin Creevy with his camera. He looked and decided it was far worse – Mrs. Cooper with a camera and a rather maniacal glint in her eyes.

" Ah ha! I've got you both now. I've had this camera here all month just waiting for this," Mrs. Cooper said excitedly. She snapped two more photos before Harry could even speak. " Well go on, do something! Please?"

" This really isn't the time…"

" Nonsense Harry," Draco admonished. He put his bag down, and shoved his keys in his pocket, before grabbing Harry about the waist and bending the rather stunned man so far backwards there were fears of them both falling over.

" Now that's what I call dramatic," Mrs. Cooper said, in between clicks of the camera.

" Was that really necessary?" Harry whispered at Draco, when he was finally allowed to stand upright again. He was rubbing his back, not sure it was appropriate for a spine to bend the way it had.

" No, but it was fun," Draco said grinning. Harry was too happy just then to stay mad at Draco, and he leaned in for a real kiss. When they broke away from this one, Mrs. Cooper was still staring, this time with a calculating expression on her face.

" There's something different about you two. I can't quite put my finger on it, but it's almost like…"

" Like we've just started dating?" Draco suggested. Mrs. Cooper nodded.

" Mrs. Cooper, I feel sort-of stupid telling you this, but when I first started telling you about Draco, we weren't actually dating at the time. It was more… wishful thinking on my part I think. Anyway, Draco went along with it, and well… He really is my boyfriend now," Harry finished, worried at her reaction, since Mrs. Cooper's expression was still sombre.

" Well, I'm a little disappointed that I was so easily fooled," Mrs. Cooper began. She suddenly beamed happily, " I know what it was! I saw the glorious couple you two would make, even before you knew it yourselves! And to think, I got to see the whole romantic beginning unfold in front of my very eyes. Oh this is wonderful! I'll tell you what I'm going to do, I'm going to develop these pictures and then put the best one in a big gold frame for you two. I do so love a project," Mrs. Cooper said happily.

Draco raised an eyebrow at Harry, clearly asking what was wrong with his hyperactive boss. Harry just shrugged and smiled.

" That would be lovely, Mrs. Cooper," Draco said politely.

" Now that we've got that over and done with, what did you bring that smells so good?" Mrs. Cooper asked.

" Oh, I forgot. I brought Harry something to eat. There's more then enough for two, if you are at all hungry Mrs. Cooper," Draco said, picking up the bag.

" Oh, well I really shouldn't," Mrs. Cooper said, eyeing the contents hungrily. " I'm on a diet," she admitted dolefully.

" You? On a diet? Rubbish!" Draco said. He took Mrs. Cooper by the hand and began leading her back to her office. Over his shoulder he winked at Harry. Draco had soon charmed Mrs. Cooper into sampling some of everything that he had brought. The chocolate truffles she had last left a blissful expression on her face.

" And he cooks," Mrs. Cooper said. She glanced at Harry, who had come in to the office after serving their last customer, and asked, " So have you done anything recently to deserve this perfect gem?"

Harry snorted at the 'perfect gem' comment, which earned him an elbow in the stomach from Draco. " As if there were anything that I could do that would make me worthy of such a boyfriend," Harry said grandiosely, fluttering his eyelashes at Draco.

" Oh shut-up," Draco said, starting to laugh.

" Seriously though Draco, this meal is fantastic," Mrs. Cooper said, sitting up straighter in her chair. " I've been thinking for awhile that this store could use a little coffee bar. Nothing extravagant of course, just a kettle, some coffee, and maybe a few snacks. These little chocolates would be perfect. I don't suppose you'd be interested in making some for me to sell, would you Draco? I'd pay you naturally, and it could just be while you're in town. I mean, if you have the time."

" Just truffles?"

" Well, truthfully I was hoping you could make a few other things too."

" Scones? Squares? That sort-of thing?" Draco asked.

" Yes, that was exactly what I had in mind. So you'll do it?"

" Well, it does get rather boring around the house, and it would be good to have something to do," Draco said. He saw that Harry was nodding approvingly. " We could try it on a probationary basis, see if it works out as you hope."

" Alright, we'll do that. I'll get my husband to build us another little counter – I think we'll put it where that wicker chair is now. Nobody sits there anymore, everyone's afraid that musty old thing will fall to pieces the moment it's sat on. Can you have something ready for me by…" Mrs. Cooper glanced up at the calendar on the wall and concentrated. " Late next week?"

" Absolutely," Draco said.

Mrs. Cooper was excited. She was scribbling reminder notes to herself, and attempting to tuck her fading blonde hair back into its silver clasp all at once. She had a neon orange post-it stuck to her jumper but Harry wasn't sure if it was intentional or not so he didn't say anything. Draco

was just as eager judging by the quick tapping his foot was making against the floor. It pleased Harry to see two people he cared for so happy.

" You can send the food with Harry, or better yet, bring it in yourself," Mrs. Cooper said.

" Yes, I can bring it," Draco replied. Only Harry and himself caught the undercurrent of pride in that statement.

" Good. Great even. I can't wait to get started," Mrs. Cooper glanced at her watch. " Lord, is that the time? Go home Harry, and take this charmer with you."

" It's too early for me to leave…"

" Don't argue with me!" Mrs. Cooper said, mock sternly. " I want you to go home and celebrate. And if I see either of you here before noon tomorrow I'll be severely disappointed. Besides, if Harry's going home, then it's really not necessary for him to eat so…"

Draco grinned, " Why don't you eat the rest? It'll only spoil otherwise."

" Well, if you insist. In fact, I think I'll close-up early and take this home. I'd attempt to pass it off as my own cooking, but I doubt my husband would believe me. It's not even burned."

Harry sympathized with Mrs. Cooper on that one. Mrs. Cooper and Harry hurriedly cleaned the shop, and then locked the shop door. Mrs. Cooper went to catch the next train to her home, while Draco and Harry started walking.

" So all the way to the shop in one piece, that really is something to celebrate," Harry said. " What do you feel like doing?"

" To be honest, I just want to go back and watch some telly. I wouldn't be adverse to getting some drinks though."

" Alcohol it is," Harry said, veering left to the nearest off-license. They must have spent longer looking at bottles then they thought, for when the came back outside it was raining. It was a steady rain and though they hurried, they were both drenched by the time they reached the flat.

" I knew there was a reason I disliked the outdoors," Draco grouched.

" We're home now. Quit your complaining," Harry said. Still muttering, Draco headed for the bedroom. Since he had to change anyway, he decided he might as well put on his pyjamas. Draco was still shivering slightly when he came into the living room.

" You really are cold. Why don't you take a bath or something?"

" Don't want to," Draco said, chafing his chilled arms.

" And why not?"

Draco flushed slightly. " You're going to think it's silly."

" Now I have to know."

" Rain is wet. Rain is the reason I'm cold. The idea of putting myself in more water to warm up has always somewhat bothered me. I want to be *dry* and warm."

Harry was laughing. " You know we have this crazy invention called hot water, don't you?"

" Shut-up. I told you it was weird," Draco said. He took the glass of wine Harry had poured out for him, and sipped it, determined to ignore Harry. Harry himself went to change into dry clothes, but when he came back in his usual sleeping attire of boxers and a t-shirt, he was also dragging the comforter to their bed. Harry lay down on his side on the carpet near the television with the blanket over him.

" Come here," Harry said. Draco warily approached, sinking slowly to the carpet in front of Harry. Harry then wrapped the blanket around them both, an arm around Draco's waist. Back to chest, their bodies were perfectly aligned. " Warmer now?"

Draco nodded, never having felt so warm in his life. While Draco watched the television program, Harry's attention was drawn elsewhere. With his fingers, he traced the sharp lines of Draco's face, slowly caressing the near flawless skin.

Draco suddenly started to chuckle. Harry looked at the television screen, but he couldn't see anything worth laughing over.

" What's so funny?"

" It moved," Draco said, still snickering. Harry finally put together what Draco was saying, and realized it was the truth.

" Sorry," Harry mumbled. Draco's hand twisted around and landed on Harry's hip.

" Don't even think about moving though. It's… an interesting sensation." Draco wriggled, pressing closer into Harry's body. Harry had to bite back a gasp.

Nothing happened for a moment or two, and Harry began to breathe a little easier. Until he felt the long, cool fingers of Draco's hand wrapping around him gently. This time the moan just wouldn't be suppressed.

" Draco, what are you doing?" Harry asked breathlessly.

" Looking for the remote control?"

" Well, that isn't the remote," Harry said. Meanwhile Harry's hands had balled into fists, and his breathing had become more erratic.

" Oh. My mistake," Draco said, hiding a smirk.

Harry waited then said, " Umm, you're hand. It's still there."

" My fault again. Sorry, I don't know what's come over me," Draco said. A very light stroke, then Draco's hand retreated.

Draco's expression was beyond smug. Harry couldn't help but want to wipe that smirk off his face.

" Harry, that's not the remote control either," Draco squeaked, rather shocked.

" I'm not looking for the remote. I thought it only fair that I get a turn," Harry said.

Draco twisted around so that he was facing Harry. In a low voice he said, " You can keep touching. We could both touch, if you wanted."

Harry nodded slowly, and Draco reached back under the blanket, moving very gently as though afraid that Harry would bolt at any moment. Harry sucked in a fast breath when Draco's questing fingers made contact. Close as their faces were, it was possible to feel every sigh, or gasp, or moan that passed their lips.

It was all above the clothes, the touching of hard flesh beneath thin fabric. Holding each other intimately, they continued to look deeply into each other's eyes; green and grey melded from the heat of the gaze. The strokes grew bolder; fingers curled and tightened. They knew it couldn't last, could already feel the tremors that spoke of a need to release. The friction was so exquisitely pleasurable that it was all they could do to remember to breathe. They tried to prolong the sensations, but it was impossible. Draco pressed his lips to Harry's at the last possible moment, keeping his eyes open, wanting to see how Harry looked when they came to completion. So they watched as they came, and gripped each other close as they drifted back from whatever place such bliss had sent them to.

There didn't seem to be any words to say. No way to describe what had happened, how good it had felt not only to be touched, but to do the touching as well. To be capable of giving pleasure as well as receiving. No words, so they smiled and kissed, and pressed their bodies closer.

" I think I may be all turned around on this 'warm and wet' concept," Draco said sleepily. Draco felt the rumbling of Harry's chest as he laughed. Draco started to laugh also as another errant thought occurred to him.

" Do I want to know why you're laughing?"

" I was just thinking of my 'to do' list. I feel that the first task is finished, but technically speaking, I don't think I've finished the second."

" What do you have to do?"

Draco grinned, but refused to reply.

End of chapter nine. I'll try to hurry with the next part, as I'm sure we're all eager to have Draco actually get into Harry's pants (as opposed to being over them *snicker*) – or wait, is that just me and my warped little mind? As always, I want to hear what you have to say, motivation is a wonderful yet elusive being.

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Chapter: 10

Here is chapter ten, and in honour of it being the tenth chapter, and because your amazing reviews passed the five hundred mark, I have made this chapter twice the usual length! Well, actually, I just kept on writing, and though my roommate thought I should I split it into two and hold the second half for review-ransom, I said 'No! I cannot do that to the good people of the fanfiction community! Never would I be so cruel!' Okay, I didn't really say that, but wouldn't it be cool if I had? So here it is, all thanks to your reviews (see? They do work), and hopefully I've inspired you to keep the comments coming!

Allow me to give a brief summary of this chapter: it's about sex. And that's about it. Enjoy!

Harry was sitting at a long table in one of the university's libraries, across from Mike and Tim. An array of aging books and crumpled articles lay before him, and he clutched a bright orange highlighter in his hand. It wasn't until he turned the page in his textbook and recognized his excessive orange highlighting that he realized he had already read this chapter. Harry gave a weary sigh.

" Problems, Harry?" Tim asked, looking up from his distressingly large pile of notes.

" No, not really," Harry replied. He let his head fall onto the table with a thunk.

" It's about sex, isn't it?" Mike said knowingly.

Tim interjected, " Not everything is about sex you know. He could be worried about school, his friends, his work, money, anything at all."

" Well actually…" Harry said, beginning to blush.

" I don't believe it," Tim said.

" Ha! See? I can recognize the symptoms blindfolded. Good thing you came to the expert. Now, are you having trouble getting it up?"

" What? No," Harry replied, mortified. " And could you keep it down? We're in a bloody library."

" Having problems keeping it up then? Or maybe getting it to go back down?"

" Oh leave off," Harry said. " Forget I said anything."

" You see I would, but now you've got me hooked, and I'm afraid I won't stop pestering until you tell me."

" I'd listen to him Harry. He's like a bloodhound following the scent of perversion down to its most minute portions," Tim said.

Harry shifted in his chair, looking from Tim's staid countenance, to Mike's overeager expression. Harry put his forehead to the table, and wrapped his arms over his head. He mumbled something that neither of his friends could understand.

" Could you repeat that Harry?"

" I said: I want to see Draco naked."

Tim and Mike looked at each other and burst out laughing. The librarian at the counter frowned at them disapprovingly.

" Let's go get some coffee, yeah? You can explain more fully on the way," Tim suggested. The trio quickly gathered up their belongings and slipped out of the library.

" I can't seem to concentrate on anything else," Harry said. " I wake up, think about him naked, drink coffee, imagine him naked, eat breakfast, wish he was naked, sit in class, picturing him naked, can't do my homework, as I'm too busy thinking of ways to get him naked. Naked, naked, NAKED! What the hell is wrong with me?"

" You're going straight to hell for sure, Harry. Imagine, picturing your boyfriend in the buff – I've never heard of such depravity, have you Mike?" Tim asked, voice practically dripping with sarcasm.

" I sure haven't, Tim. Oh, except from everyone else on the planet! Jesus, Harry, you enjoy

feeling guilty far too much. But I do have one question: what's stopping you from getting a glimpse at gorgeous-boy?"

" I don't know. I just can't seem to come up with a good way of going about it."

" You two have been… well, you've been getting closer, haven't you?" Tim asked. They had reached the coffee shop by this time, and were sitting at a small table by the window. A waitress came and took their orders before Harry answered.

" Yes, we've been… rather involved I guess you could say."

Mike seemed to be bursting, wanting to shout out tips and advice, but Tim kept quelling these impulses with well placed glances.

" Has Draco seen you naked?"

Harry decided to maintain his blush for the rest of the conversation, just to save himself time. " Partially."

Tim was thoughtful for a while, and their coffee arrived. There was the usual brief interlude as they prepared their coffees according to taste. Harry took a careful sip and gave a small contented sigh. Coffee could fix almost anything.

" I think what it is, is that Draco is a little more… aggressive. He knows what he wants, and at the moment what he wants is you. He probably hasn't considered the removal of his own clothes yet, so if you're serious, you're going to have to be a little aggressive yourself, and take the initiative. Do you follow me?"

" Yes, but I still don't know where to begin. I mean, I can't just say: 'hey Draco, I want to see you naked. Strip, please."

" Sure you can! I could even be with you when you say it – purely for emotional support, of course," Mike said.

" Of course," Tim said, rolling his eyes. " Harry, the way I see it, you've got three options. You can be honest, and tell him what you want; you can do nothing, and hope it happens on its own, or you can be brave and go for it the next time circumstances provide."

" Or you can wait until he's asleep, steal all his clothes, throw them out the window, and then dump water on his pyjamas so that he has no choice but to walk around without a stitch on. I volunteer to help you in this noble pursuit – shall we say midnight?"

" Do you have any shame?" Tim asked.

" Tim! I'm appalled. I have no desire to see Draco's nude form – though I imagine it's delectable.

I'd be doing this entirely for Harry's benefit."

" I never knew you were so altruistic," Harry said.

" I'm terribly unappreciated," Mike said. " Yet I live to give."

All three of them started laughing then, even Mike though he couldn't remember if he'd meant to be serious or not. Tim and Mike spent the next little while teasing Harry good naturedly, Mike being more then a little surprised at the pace of Harry's and Draco's relationship.

" Not everyone ends up in bed together on the first date," Tim said, finally coming to Harry's aide.

" Didn't hear you complaining," Mike said. This time it was Tim who was blushing.

" Well, thanks for the advice. I think," Harry said, standing up. He dropped a few coins on the table to pay for his coffee. " But I must be off. I've got things to do, people to see, and boyfriends to debauch."

" Now you're talking," Mike said.

" Okay, I'll see you two later," Harry said. Harry had made it to the door, when Mike yelled out to him across the shop.

" I thought of another plan. Two words: strip poker!"

A few of the coffee shop's patrons snickered, and Harry ducked his head down into his coat collar before hurriedly escaping into the cool outdoors. As he walked home, Harry alternated between thoughts of Draco naked, and ways that he could kill Mike.

When Harry walked into the flat later that evening, he knew instinctively that something was wrong. No, not wrong, he clarified for himself, just different. It didn't take him long to figure out that Draco was gone. Harry found a note on the kitchen table, that he read out loud as he rummaged in the kitchen cupboards for a snack.

" Harry, I went out for a walk. I feel like there ought to be fanfare playing, some applause at least to mark this auspicious event, but I've waited and still nothing. Anyway, I should be back before you, but if not, can you heat up the stew that's on the stove? And stop eating biscuits, you'll spoil your appetite." At this point, Harry guiltily swallowed his third chocolate biscuit, and dutifully returned the package to the cupboard. Wiping the counter to remove any stray crumps so that Draco wouldn't know what he'd done, he continued with the note, " Then again, I'm not sure it's possible to ever give you too much food, considering your stomach is like some kind-of infinitely large black hole."

That was the end of the note, and Harry couldn't help but wonder how Draco managed to come

across, in such a short note, as being both arrogant and considerate. Chuckling somewhat, Harry folded the note and put it in his pocket.

Harry lifted the cover off the pot on the stove and inspected the contents. The smell of a rich beef and barley stew wafted up to his nostrils, and he breathed in the smell appreciatively. Setting the stove to low, Harry grabbed a wooden spoon and slowly stirred tonight's meal.

Draco walked into the flat, and headed for the kitchen where he heard Harry humming tunelessly. Sliding stealthily up behind Harry, Draco wrapped his arms around Harry's waist, and rested his chin on Harry's shoulder.

" Smells good," Draco said.

" That's what I thought – looks appetizing too," Harry said. Draco placed a small kiss on Harry's neck; biting gently and delighting in the shiver that coursed through Harry's trim body.

" Are we talking about the stew or you?" Draco asked rhetorically. Reluctantly, Draco gave Harry a final squeeze before stepping back. " You hungry now? Or do you want to wait until later?"

" I could eat," Harry said.

Harry laid the table, and Draco ladled them both out some stew along with thick slices of soft bread to sop up the gravy.

" Did you have a good walk?" Harry asked conversationally.

" Not bad," Draco said. " It was weird at first, but I think it's getting easier. It's best when I can just distract myself, so that I'm not so hyper-aware of every little movement."

Harry nodded his understanding, and then the conversation stalled. They ate in silence for a while until Draco ventured another topic to talk about,

" You seem preoccupied; you have all week come to think about it. Something bothering you?"

Harry smiled, " Just thinking."

" Well don't hurt yourself," Draco replied.

" I'm surrounded by comedians," Harry complained.

" Oh really? Who's my competition?"

" Mike," Harry replied.

" Should have guessed. What words of wisdom was he spouting today?" Draco asked. They began clearing the table, and Harry started washing the plates. Draco hopped up onto the counter and watched.

" Oh, the usual stuff," Harry replied. Inspiration seemed to strike Harry all at once, and he glanced slyly at Draco, " Do you want to play some cards tonight?"

Draco nodded his agreement, and only just missed Harry's smug little smile, which was unfortunate since if he had seen it, Draco would have known that Harry was definitely up to something.

Draco and Harry sat cross-legged on the floor in the living room, facing each other, a new deck of exploding snap cards between them. The radio was playing softly in the background, and the lighting was dim. They sat so near to each other, their knees practically touched.

They played a few games, but the novelty of the exploding cards soon wore off. Snap was a game of chance, after all, and Draco soon got bored. He sighed tiredly, and wondered if Harry would mind if they quit soon.

" Bored?" Harry asked.

" A little," Draco admitted, as he picked up the cards and shuffled them.

" We could up the stakes a little," Harry suggested tentatively.

" What do you mean?"

" We play through the deck, and the person who gets the most explosions has to… remove… some clothes," said Harry, amazed when he got the sentence out more or less coherently.

" Didn't think you had it in you, Potter," Draco said coolly. Draco dealt the newly shuffled cards and placed them neatly within reach. " You're on."

The game took on a new feel, and both players would readily admit that the altered rules made things much more exciting. Harry lost the first few games, and had to remove both of his socks and his belt. Draco lost a game finally, then Harry again, who removed his jumper. Draco was dismayed to discover that Harry was wearing a T-shirt underneath. Draco then lost a series of games, one after the other, until he ended up with the same amount of clothes remaining as Harry. They both knew the next game was crucial – whoever lost was going to have to remove a significant item of clothing.

" Damn," Draco muttered. Six explosions, to Harry's four. Of course, the delighted expression on Harry's face compensated somewhat.

" Quit stalling," Harry teased. Draco scowled at Harry, and stood up. Rather calmly, he reached

for the button on his trousers, pulling down the zipper, and eventually dropping the pants to the floor. He folded them quickly, and set the pants aside, before sitting back on the floor in his boxers.

Harry licked his suddenly dry lips, and tried not to stare. Stammering slightly, he said, " I thought… I thought the shirt would be the next to go."

" Something wrong with my legs?" Draco said. The tone was deliberately light, but Harry detected a faint uncertainty behind his words.

" No. Definitely nothing wrong," Harry said, still staring. Draco waved his hand in front of Harry's glazed expression and smirked,

" Can we keep playing then?"

Harry nodded, and reshuffled the deck. The following round of playing was intense, the defeats almost as enjoyable as the wins. Harry however felt the game was unfair – he had no chance of winning when faced with such a serious distraction.

" Ha! I win, strip Harry," Draco crowed happily. Harry sighed and removed his glasses, before yanking his t-shirt off over his head. Draco's eyes widened, and Harry grinned. At least in the next game they were both going to be similarly handicapped.

" Ready to play again?" Harry asked. Draco tried to form words, but his mind kept drawing a blank. " Draco?"

" Screw the game," Draco said quickly, and launched himself at Harry. They collided roughly, Harry being pushed onto his back with a blond fury resting heavily on his chest. The cards lay in disarray under Harry's body, as Draco crushed his mouth over Harry's.

Harry returned the kiss before pushing away slightly, needing to talk.

" But we haven't finished the game," Harry said plaintively. He'd been so close to finally getting Draco naked.

" Yeah, but wouldn't you rather do this, then play some silly game of snap?"

" Ouch!" Harry squealed, and Draco's expression grew concerned.

" What's the matter?"

" When you said S-N-A-P one of the cards exploded. Right under my butt too," Harry explained. He then started to giggle, as the explosion wasn't so much painful as ticklish.

" Oh dear. I think I'd better inspect the area for injury," Draco said seriously.

" I really don't think that's necessary," Harry said, smiling.

" You don't want me to kiss it better?" Draco asked, voice wobbling slightly.

" Don't you dare pout, you know I can't resist that," Harry replied. Draco stuck out his bottom lip a little further, and redoubled his efforts at looking pathetic.

Laughing, Harry grabbed hold of Draco's shoulders and rolled, succeeding in switching their positions so that Draco was underneath. Not to be outdone, Draco wriggled out of Harry's grasp, before pouncing again. The result of this was a prolonged mock-wrestling match, with neither partner too overly concerned with who was winning. Somewhere along the way, however, Draco had managed to undo the top of Harry's pants without Harry noticing. As they took a breather, Draco saw his chance and slid his hands under the waistband of Harry's pants and boxers, deliberately placing his cold hands on Harry's pleasantly curved backside.

" Whoa! Cold hands! Down pants!" Harry said, eyes wide.

" Glad you noticed," Draco said smugly. " Just checking for damage. I have to say though, that everything feels pretty good to me."

" Are you… going to do anything else while you're down there?" Harry asked shyly.

" I would, except that this is as far as I got in my planning, so I'm at a bit of a loss over what to do next. Damn my lack of foresight." Draco gave Harry a pinch, and then removed his hands entirely, much to Harry's disappointment.

" What are you talking about?"

" My plan. To get into your pants," Draco explained patiently. Harry grinned,

" You had a plan to get into my pants?"

" Well, I'd say it was more of a mission. Though to be honest I was so sure it was never going to happen that I never did get around to pondering what I would do if I ever did find a way in."

" And to think, I've been struggling all week to find a way of seeing you naked," Harry said.

" You have?" Draco asked, rather stunned. Harry scheming for a peek at his body didn't sound like the Harry he knew. Then his gaze narrowed shrewdly, " Let me guess, the strip snap was all Mike's idea?"

" Well he suggested poker, but yeah, other then that it was Mike's plan. Then you had to go spoil it all by trying to jump my bones mid-game."

Draco blushed, " It's your own damn fault. Nobody should look that good without a shirt."

" I wouldn't mind seeing you without a shirt," Harry admitted.

" Really?"

Harry chuckled, " You sound surprised."

" Well, you've never tried to get my clothes off before. And contrary to popular belief, I'm not supremely confident in my appearance – I've got a few insecurities like everyone else. My chest for one; an area in which I don't think we really compare," Draco said honestly.

Harry propped himself up slightly to better look at Draco's expression. It had quite honestly never occurred to him that Draco would ever feel the slightest bit self-conscious. Harry, after all, thought Draco was the most gorgeous individual he had ever seen.

" That's ridiculous. You've seen my scars – definitely not a selling feature." Harry adjusted his position so he was lying on his side next to Draco, rather then crushing him from above. " I was really relieved when you didn't seem to mind them. You don't, do you?"

" No. At least, not in the way you mean. I am sorry you got hurt," Draco said. He lightly touched one of the faded scars that ran across Harry's shoulders. " How did you get them?"

Harry sighed, and let his head fall to rest against Draco's shoulder. " Here and there. The one that goes from my back right around to my stomach was caused by a fire-whip – stung pretty bad. The curved one on my shoulder was a knife wound meant to hit my heart, but I twisted around just in time so it only grazed me. The one that runs straight down my spine I did when I was a kid, when I was fooling around at a playground. Funny that I remember that one better then the ones that came later. I've got more scars on my legs. I was never too intent on self-preservation – I'm more of an act first, think later kind-of person."

" That I would believe," Draco said.

" But what you said before… about comparing us, and being worried because of that. That's just stupid, because," and here Harry paused for a breath, hoping he didn't sound completely moronic, " You'll never be anything but beautiful to me."

Draco stopped breathing for a moment; Harry could tell because Draco's chest paused in its regular pattern of rise and fall. Then Draco went into a flurry of motion, touching Harry everywhere with shaky but determined fingers.

" Need to feel you're real," Draco muttered, running fingers through Harry's hair, and down the planes of his face. When he had touched and assured himself of the reality of Harry, Draco had to repeat the process just in case.

Both Draco's actions and his words caught Harry by surprise, but when he realized Draco was quaking with some strong emotion, Harry responded immediately. Harry held onto Draco tightly, gently stroking Draco's back until the shaking subsided.

" Did I say something wrong?" Harry asked.

" Quite the contrary," Draco whispered. Draco took a few deep breaths, surprised at his emotional outburst. Recovering his infamous composure, he said, " However, when you said beautiful, you really meant ruggedly handsome or outrageously sexy, right? Beautiful isn't a very manly attribute."

" How about I just punch you in the shoulder or something next time," Harry suggested. Draco glared at him, and Harry laughed.

" Now you're just being ridiculous. Time for bed, I think," Draco said. Harry yawned, and let himself be helped off the floor. He glanced at the pile of discarded clothes, both his and Draco's, and at the scattered cards, before deciding to clean up tomorrow.

" I do have one question," Harry said, as they were climbing into bed, and settling under the covers.

" What's that?"

" How did you get my pants undone so fast?"

Draco snorted, " You forget who you're dealing with. I'm a Slytherin – ambitious and sneaky to the end."

" Who knew there would actually be an advantage to being in that house?" Harry said. Despite the fact that it was obvious Harry was teasing, Draco still scowled darkly.

Harry woke up some time later in the middle of the night because Draco was tossing and turning slightly in his sleep. Never one to sleep too heavily, as nightmares came just as frequently to Harry as they did to Draco, waking up because of Draco's twitchings was not an uncommon occurrence.

Except that now Harry's eyes had adapted to the gloom, it was clear that Draco was not experiencing a nightmare, but an altogether different sort of dream. The kind-of dream that made Harry feel as though he should turn his back and give Draco some privacy. But he didn't turn around and he didn't stop watching. The shallow but hurried breathing, the flush of red across Draco's delicate cheekbones, and the tight curling of Draco's fingers into the bed-sheets, were soon not just events to be witnessed by Harry, but shared in. Though Harry lay immobile, watching every single one of Draco's spontaneous movements, he could feel the heat building in his body. Draco made a tiny mewl of noise, and Harry groaned. Harry slid forward a little on the bed, uncaring that the closer he got to Draco's seemingly scorching body, the higher the

temperature rose. A steady rush of blood began pooling low in Harry's stomach. Every twitch, every sound from Draco, was stoking Harry to greater arousal. The steady ache was becoming painful, but though he wanted release, he didn't see how that was possible seeing that the object of his desires was still unconscious.

Draco turned suddenly onto his back, pressing an arm across his eyes, and letting out a heavy sigh. Harry held his breath, and tried to quiet the racing of his pulse. Draco let out another deep-seated sigh, before he shifted again, this time to rub the sleep from his eyes. His gaze darted instinctively to the clock by the bedside, and then just as quickly he turned to look at Harry to make sure his dreaming hadn't woken the other man. Obviously it had. Draco's eyes met two green orbs burning with such intensity that Draco had to look away. Unfortunately, this meant that he noticed the telltale bulge in the blankets. Blushing madly, Draco looked desperately back at Harry, hoping beyond hope that Harry hadn't noticed. Once again, Draco's hopes were for naught. Harry's gaze had shifted also, latching onto the sight of Draco's arousal, which twitched under the scrutiny. Draco shut his eyes, blocking out the scene, wishing that embarrassment alone could put him out of his misery.

He hadn't spoken in his sleep, had he? Hadn't moaned Harry's name over and over again the way his dream self had? So intent was Draco in worrying about what Harry would think of him and his erotic fantasies, he didn't notice when Harry sat up. Draco also barely registered that the blankets and sheets were being drawn down to the foot of the bed. It was when Harry touched him, that his mind came screaming back to the here and now. Grey, passion-filled eyes flew open and absorbed themselves in watching Harry trace tentative fingers up and down Draco's sensitive length. Far too soon, Harry pulled back, and sat carefully in the middle of the bed, refusing to meet Draco's eyes.

Draco's mind was screaming at Harry, begging him to continue. Harry's mind was filled with conflicting thoughts – the fierce desire to touch, to possess, warring with a misplaced sense of guilt, and an all too real sense of fear. What if Harry did something wrong? What if he already had?

" Why?" Draco asked, not realizing he had spoken out loud until Harry responded.

" I was… just curious," Harry said, shame-faced. Harry felt angry with himself, and disgusted with the lie he had just told.

" That's all it was? You were just curious?" Draco asked. Though he would have preferred almost any other answer then the one Harry had given, Draco tried not to sound upset, tried not to sound dejected. Something in his voice, however, must have given Draco away. Harry looked up; the hurt in Draco's voice made honesty more important then his insecurities.

" I did it because I really wanted to touch you," Harry said simply. Draco smiled very softly, and shifted over to where Harry sat. Draco's fingers gripped Harry's chin, and tilted Harry's head upwards until their eyes met. There was a determined set to Draco's shoulders, and a certainty in his voice that Harry found reassuring,

" What you want, Harry, I want too."

Harry swallowed nervously before placing his arms carefully around Draco's waist and drawing him closer. The bed creaked as Draco slid forward onto his knees. Draco touched the side of Harry's face in silent appreciation, before he brought his mouth down upon Harry's. The kiss was clumsy at first; too much passion to be tender, too much need to go slow.

Being on his knees on a soft mattress made Draco's balance more then a little precarious. As the kiss deepened, Draco instinctively pressed further into Harry's embrace, at which point he overbalanced and ended up toppling into Harry. Their teeth clacked together uncomfortably, and Draco thought he might have bit Harry's lip rather harshly.

Harry pulled back, apologetic. " Sorry. I feel like I don't know what I'm doing, but I want to do it anyway."

" I don't know what I'm doing either," Draco admitted. He grinned suddenly, " But I bet I'm really good at it, whatever it is."

With that said, Draco climbed into Harry's lap, locked his legs around Harry's waist (which was definitely an easier position to maintain), and resumed the kiss.

Draco's attitude went a long way towards conquering Harry's doubts. Harry felt a little like he had that night Draco had first asked him to dance. He felt the same fear caused by an unknown situation, and he felt the same protectiveness coming from Draco. Even the solution was the same; Harry let the last of his walls crumble and gave himself over completely into Draco's care.

Draco groaned into Harry's mouth when he felt the rest of Harry's restraint melt away. It felt so good to touch Harry, to touch that body with complete freedom. It was better then imagined, better then anything Draco could ever have hoped for. He wanted the little noises that escaped Harry's mouth, wanted to feel the beating of Harry's heart, wanted to know what skin on skin really felt like. Tonight, Draco wanted Harry; it was as simple as that.

And Draco wanted to be taken in return. Very gently, handling the being in his arms as carefully as he possibly could, Harry leaned forward and placed Draco on his back on the bed. Harry settled himself over Draco's body.

They were pressed together; hip to hip, chest to chest, mouth to mouth. It was as though they were trying to make a world entirely unto themselves by eliminating all space between their bodies. If they could just get closer, if they could just wrap their arms and legs tight enough, then maybe they'd sink into one another, and disappear into one entity. Leave the world to everyone else, because all they needed was right there in that room, in their arms.

As much as Draco wanted to touch and be touched, he still felt protective of Harry. Draco was

careful to move slowly, letting the passion grow naturally, giving Harry ample time to decide whether he wanted to continue or call a halt. Harry didn't want to stop. When Draco began pushing Harry's t-shirt up, Harry helped by shrugging out of it.

" Hey Harry, remember this?" Draco said, twisting softly the gold ring adorning Harry's nipple. Harry let out a ragged breath, unable to keep from thrusting slightly into Draco's hips. Draco's moan of appreciation led Harry to repeat the action, rocking his hips slowly and rhythmically.

" Did I finally respond right?" Harry asked, voice low and whispery. Draco's back arched off the mattress, meeting Harry's thrusts with movements of his own. The pleasurable friction left them both too breathless for words, so Draco just nodded, pressing his lips eagerly to the side of Harry's neck.

Harry braced himself on one arm so as to not crush Draco, and with his one free hand he began undoing the buttons on Draco's flannel pyjama top. He cursed under his breath when the difficult task was made near impossible by the shaking of his overeager hand. Draco squeezed Harry's hand briefly, before proceeding to help with the removal of his shirt. With the buttons undone, Harry brushed the fabric clear of Draco's chest.

Harry went over every inch of bared marble flesh with first his eyes, and then his fingers. He looked up at Draco who seemed anxiously awaiting some kind-of sign from Harry. Harry smiled and lowered his head, licking a path down the smooth column of Draco's neck, down the sharp lines of his collarbones, and further still, hesitantly taking one of Draco's nipples in his mouth, encouraged by Draco's quickened breathing. Sliding up again to kiss Draco's swollen lips, Harry shivered, feeling the drag of bare skin as their chests met.

" You're shivering," Draco said, breaking free from the kiss. " Stand up and we'll get under the blankets."

Harry tried to protest, explaining that it was not the cold that was the cause of his shaking, but Draco was not to be denied. Harry stood up and waited as Draco reached for the blankets that were twisted at the bottom of the bed. Draco stood up too as he straightened the sheets, and tossed the blankets back into some kind-of order. When finished he pulled back the covers enough for them to climb back in, and Harry kissed him, eager to continue where they had left off.

" Wait," Draco mumbled. He pushed Harry back slightly, and then seemed to pause. Glancing around the room, Draco focused on a spot on the carpet, rather then risk a look at Harry. Harry waited as patiently as he could as Draco finally sucked in a steadying breath, and took action. Draco hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his pyjamas and pushed them down until they pooled at his feet. Stepping out of the pyjama bottoms, Draco sat down on the bed and waited.

Draco looked so vulnerable at that moment; naked and fragile, he was completely at Harry's mercy. It went straight to Harry's heart, the trust that Draco was so obviously giving him. And though it should have terrified Harry, this significant step of intimacy, it didn't. All Harry wanted

to do was to reassure Draco, to hold him and keep him safe. In short: to love him.

Harry tugged down his own boxers, and stepped over to the bed,

" Move over," Harry said, and Draco finally dared raise his head. They locked eyes for a moment, before Draco slid a little further onto the bed, and under the covers, holding the blankets up so Harry could climb under them too. Draco reached his arm around Harry and firmly tucked the blankets around them both.

" You should be warmer now," Draco said.

Harry pulled Draco back into his arms, responding softly, " Yes, thanks, I am."

It didn't take them long to come the first time. Their nerves and senses had been kept at too keen a pitch for too long, for them to expect to last once their bare skin connected. Friction alone was enough to bring them to release the first time, but it didn't end there. They continued to kiss and cuddle, and touch and explore, unwilling to part for more then a few seconds.

Draco was determined to use his hands to bring Harry to a second release; he wanted to give that pleasure, wanted to feel what it felt like when Harry came. When Draco touched him, Harry gasped, and it was the most wonderful sound Draco had ever heard, next to the sound Harry made when he came, a soft sound that was partly a whimper, partly a moan – a sound Draco could happily spend the rest of his life trying to decipher.

Harry lay on his side, resting his head on Draco's shoulder. His limbs felt heavy, tired, and suffused with a pleasant tingling, which meant his muscles would only consider moving for extreme purposes. Harry summoned unheard of energy reserves, and roused himself.

" What are you doing?" Draco asked.

" Returning the favour," Harry said, giving Draco a quick smile. Draco's toes curled in anticipation. There was touching, certainly, a hand that stroked and caressed much as Draco's had, but the moist heat of Harry's mouth was something that startled Draco into near incoherence.

" Harry… what?"

" Am I doing it wrong?"

" Hell no," Draco said, perhaps a little too forcefully, but Harry grinned at the tone.

The sensations quickly became too much, and Draco shut his eyes, part of him wanting to make the moment last, the other part begging to have the climax crash over him. When it did hit, Draco fell back against the bed, revelling in the warm glow that seemed to permeate his very soul. Harry dragged himself alongside Draco, and placed a simple kiss on Draco's mouth. Draco

was too tired to respond much to the kiss, both their bodies now pleasantly sated, but when Harry lay down heavily next to Draco, it was Draco who wrapped pale arms around Harry's waist and drew them closer.

" You didn't have to," Draco said sleepily.

" I know, I wanted to," Harry said, feeling his eyelids droop. " And I figured… it would be less messy."

" You remembered," Draco said, slightly awed.

" Of course," Harry said. Harry snuggled in closer to Draco, pulling the blankets tightly around them both. They probably would have spoken more, but sleep claimed them both before they could even utter their goodnights.

The next morning, Draco woke up and everything was different. Same place, same time, same warm body next to his, but still, everything was different. Maybe it was just that everything was better. He was up before Harry, which was not at all surprising. Draco usually awoke earlier then Harry, and he had been known before to watch the other man sleep. Never had he watched, however, with such a goofy grin on his face. Harry was on his stomach, head turned towards Draco, the blankets drawn down to his waist. It sent a delicious thrill through Draco's body to know that underneath those blankets Harry was completely bare. Harry's famously messy black hair was even more mussed then usual, but because Draco knew it was his own fingers that had caused the disarray, he wasn't going to complain. He looked, Draco thought, taking in the faint scar on Harry's pale forehead, the toned muscles, and the gently bruised lips, like something out of an erotic dream. It was certainly something out of one of Draco's dreams, and he couldn't believe he actually got to be the first person ever to wake up to a Harry that looked like this.

Harry's eyelids fluttered open, green eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the morning light. The first thing he saw with his imperfect vision was Draco, lying on his side and propped up by an elbow, studying him. Harry was soon wearing a smile that matched Draco's.

" Hey," Harry said.

" Hey," Draco returned. The blond moved a little closer, coming into focus to Harry. Draco put a lazy arm across Harry's back and placed his head on Harry's pillow, their faces only inches apart. " I didn't think it would be like this."

" Like what?" Harry said, tucking a blond tendril of hair back behind Draco's ear.

" I thought the first thing I'd want to do was take a shower. I thought I'd be nervous and shy around you; that I'd try to sneak out of bed and dress before you woke-up. I thought I'd be better able to resist touching you. But it's not like that at all. I don't want to get out of bed, I don't feel self-conscious, and I want to touch you even more then I did before."

" I know the feeling," Harry said. It did feel surprisingly comfortable lying there next to each other: warm, cozy, and intimate. In fact, there was nowhere else Harry wanted to be. Harry couldn't understand how anyone could be casual about sex; he couldn't imagine sharing this moment with anyone other then Draco. It just felt right, somehow.

They dozed a little, cuddled a little, and thought a little. Draco eventually got up, slid on his pyjama pants and went to make coffee. He brought the mugs back to the bedroom, giving Harry a cup, and sitting himself down with the bed's headboard against his back.

" So, how's it feel now that you're not a virgin anymore?" Draco asked, when they were sufficiently more awake due to caffeine.

" We didn't, uh, well you know. You think what we did counts?" Harry asked, giving a contented sigh when he tasted his coffee. Naked in bed, Draco at his side, and hot coffee in his hand – could life get any better?

" You know, I think this would be a perfect test to see how well you know me. What do you think my answer to that question is?" Draco asked.

Harry pondered slightly, " Well, obviously since you were the one to ask in the first place, you think we've lost our virgin status. So, I'm guessing that you feel that it's not the act itself that matters, but rather what a person thinks. Another one of those 'conditions of the mind'," Harry said. Draco was nodding along, very pleased with Harry's answer so far. His confidence bolstered, Harry continued, " So you probably think that virginity is something you have to consciously choose to give – it can't be taken by force or by accident, it happens when you deliberately decide to give your body and your mind to someone else, and let them touch you."

Draco gave Harry a quick kiss, " Excellent deduction, Holmes. Quite right on every particular."

" So I'm not a virgin. Because I did that last night; I gave myself to you."

" I did too," Draco said, leaning in for a longer kiss. Harry shot up, and he would have spilled his coffee had the mug he was holding not been drained dry.

" We have to celebrate! Have a 'We are not virgins anymore' day," Harry said excitedly.

" W.A.N.V.A? Couldn't you have chosen words that would make a better acronym?" Draco replied glibly.

Harry rolled his eyes slightly, " Come on, it'll be fun."

" What does one do, exactly, on such a day?" Draco asked, humouring his partner.

" Umm, well, we could go to breakfast," Harry said, making up a plan on the spot. He glanced at the clock and made some calculations, " Well, actually, by the time we would be ready to go,

it would be closer to lunch… We could have brunch. Eat really sickeningly sweet things like waffles with strawberries and whipped cream. Then we could go shopping, or something. No, wait, we could go downtown and check out the museums. You'd like that, I bet."

" Could we go to another movie?" Draco asked.

" Sure!" Harry said, glad that Draco seemed to be getting into the idea. " We'll go to a late matinee somewhere."

" And can we have dinner out? Stop for dessert somewhere? Sit at a little café and drink espresso, and make fun of the people who walk by?"

" Absolutely. Anything we want," Harry said.

" Can we wear t-shirts with great big flashing arrows pointing at each other that say 'I lost my virginity to this bloke'?"

" Of course we can…" Harry trailed off when what Draco had actually said finally registered. His eyes narrowed, " You're mocking me."

" Just a little," Draco conceded. " Fortunately, I am feeling very, very, content so I'm prepared to be generous. Besides, you know I like to spend money frivolously."

Once the decision was made, Draco and Harry showered (separately) and got dressed to go out. Soon they were sitting at a restaurant where Harry did indeed get his waffles smothered in red strawberries and thick fresh cream. Draco had eggs and sausage, and tried to do the crossword in the newspaper. Later they took the underground downtown, and visited the natural history museum, followed by the national art museum. With the intellectual portion of the day taken care of, they went and saw an action film that had more explosions then dialogue, and if there was a plot, neither Draco nor Harry picked up on it, not that it mattered much. The movie let out in the early evening, and feeling hungry, Draco and Harry stopped at a Chinese take-away before heading home.

They set out the food on the coffee table, choosing to eat out of the cartons in front of the telly, rather then at the table. Neither felt like doing dishes on their 'W.A.N.V.A.' day.

At the end of their meal, Harry tossed Draco a fortune cookie, and they broke into them, though Draco made some cynical comment about fortune cookies being even sillier than divination class. Harry had to agree, but at least fortune cookies, as a general rule, didn't tell him of an upcoming gruesome death, unlike certain divination professors.

" 'You will find happiness with a new love'," Harry read out loud. " Wow, sorry Draco. That sure was fast, huh?"

" Ha ha, very funny," Draco said, breaking into his own cookie. " 'Crisis is just another word for

opportunity. Seize the moment'. Well, you heard the cookie. Let's go to bed."

Harry laughed, " It's seven-thirty! Bit early for sleep, don't you think?"

" Oh my poor, sweet, idiot Harry. When are you going to learn that going to bed and going to sleep are two entirely different things?" Draco asked. Draco didn't wait for an answer as he dragged an un-protesting Harry to the bedroom to show him the distinction.

If you asked Harry what he learned in class that week, what work or the weather was like, or any other question that didn't have to do with Draco, then he wouldn't have been able to answer. He had a one-track mind that week, and all thoughts, regardless of origin, always circulated back to Draco. Mike teased him incessantly about it, recognizing the love-struck expression that seemed to be a permanent feature on Harry's face. It made a welcome change to Harry's usually gloomy and brooding behaviour however, and despite all his teasing, Mike was very happy for his friend.

" Harry, I've got an idea for this weekend," Mike said, snapping his fingers in front of Harry's face to be sure he had the other man's attention.

" I've already got plans," Harry replied. " I'm playing rugby with Tim on Saturday, remember?"

" This would be after, a night-time thing. See, there's this eighties themed night that the university is promoting, and I thought with you being such an eighties fan, it would be fun to get the four of us dressed up. I've got the costumes all planned out, so you don't even have to do anything. Please, say you'll come? It'll be such a blast!"

" It does sound fun, but I get the feeling you're hiding something. What's the catch?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow sceptically.

" Harry! I would never try to keep something from you…"

" Mike," Harry said threateningly.

" Fine. It's at Dudley's club. But it'll be packed with people, I'm sure we could avoid him," Mike said pleadingly.

" Let's go," Harry said decisively. " I don't want Dudley to stop me from doing something I want to do."

" That's the spirit!" Mike said happily, jumping out of his chair. " We'll come to the flat on Saturday night and get you two ready before leaving, yeah?"

" Sounds good," Harry said. " In fact, I'll go home and tell Draco about it right now."

Having said his goodbye to Mike, Harry headed for home, and told Draco of the plans. Draco

also picked up on the fact that Harry was trying to keep some important fact about the evening secret.

" What aren't you telling me?"

" Dudley's going to be there," Harry admitted with a sigh. " He works as the bouncer at the bar we'll be going to. The club's only a few blocks from the one we went to last time. Usually when he's not working, Dudley sticks to his own club because he gets his drinks for half-price. That night we ran into him, though, wasn't the first time Dudley had strayed to a different club."

" That explains why Tim and Mike knew about Dudley, at least. But if you still want to go, then I don't see any reason why I should refuse. This time though I'll remember to duck that right hook of his," Draco said.

" If it comes to that, then ducking would definitely be a good thing," Harry said, giving Draco a kiss. " I like your face the way it is."

Friday came quickly for both Draco and Harry. Harry was working on a thousand different projects it seemed, and Draco was just as busy preparing the latest collection of snack food for Mrs. Cooper. The fist shipment had met with enormous success, and Mrs. Cooper had had to phone Draco and ask for another order of everything after only one day. They had finally settled on prices and quantities, and while it was more work then Draco had counted on, it was also more money then he had expected. Draco derived a great deal of satisfaction from doing something productive and valued for a change.

Next week, Draco was even going to start taking shifts at the bookshop, manning the coffee counter for a few hours during the busier parts of the day. He was a little apprehensive about undergoing that much social interaction, but he wanted to do it anyway, maybe just to prove that he could.

Harry came home to a flustered Draco. It wasn't often that Harry got to see Draco this way – usually Draco was flawlessly organized and impeccably composed. Tonight, however, Draco was irritated, the kitchen was a mess, and there was flour on the tip of his nose. Harry thought he looked adorably dishevelled, but knew any comment like that was likely to get his head ripped off. He wisely said nothing and let Draco vent.

"… And then I ran out of milk, just as I reached the correct boiling stage, so I had to scrap the whole batch while I ran out to the store. I tell you, it's been just that kind-of day."

" Do you need me to pick up something for you now?" Harry asked, trying to be sympathetic.

Draco took a deep breath in, more relaxed now that he had been able to complain to someone. " No, actually everything's under control now. I just have to wrap everything up and it'll be all ready for me to drop off tomorrow morning. Did you invite Tim and Mike for dinner tomorrow, and are they coming?"

Harry started cleaning the kitchen, while Draco gratefully sat down at the table and wrapped his baked goods individually in plastic wrap, sticking small white price tags to each one.

Draco had thought since Mike and Tim were taking them out tomorrow night, and coming to the flat early anyways to bring them their costumes (Draco was a little leery of that aspect, as was Harry), that it might be nice to make a meal for all of them first.

" Oh right, I invited them and they said yes, rather enthusiastically I might add. I said to come about six, is that alright?"

" Perfect, yes," Draco said. " But it means omelettes or something for tonight. I didn't have time to cook something for us, and what I did make I need to save for tomorrow."

" Ah, but that's why I picked us up a frozen pizza on my way home," Harry said, picking up a plastic bag that had gone unnoticed on the floor.

" My hero," Draco said grandiosely.

The following morning, although it was Saturday, both Harry and Draco were up early. Harry was heading for a pick-up game of rugby at a nearby field, with Tim and some other friends from their school. Draco was going to the bookshop to drop of his baked goods.

" How do you play rugby, anyway?" Draco asked.

" Oh, we don't really follow any rules when it's just us lads," Harry said. " If you want and if you have time, you could stop by the field later and watch. That would be easier then me trying to explain."

" I might just do that," Draco said. After Draco had visited the bookshop, and after a rather long chat with Mrs. Cooper, during which he caught her up to speed on all things Harry related, Draco did indeed head for the public athletic pitch.

When Draco arrived, he noticed that there were four girls sitting in the one small block of bleachers, obviously girlfriends come to watch their men play. Draco curled his lip a little in disgust, not liking that he was about to join this feminine audience. He sat on a bench that was as far away from them as possible and turned his attention to the field. After watching Harry and the others tackle each other into the muddy and wet field, he decided that he was better off on the bleachers, even if it was damaging to his reputation.

" You look a little lost," said a cheerful female voice. Draco looked up into a face that was vaguely familiar. Obviously the girl recognized him as well. " I remember you, your name's Dragon, right?"

" Close, it's Draco. And you're Katie, correct?"

" Draco… I knew it was something a little odd. And you're right, it's Katie. You remember my friend Becky? She was on the train that night as well."

Draco nodded a greeting to the other girl. The two other women were introduced, and before Draco knew it, well-intentioned females, all chattering, surrounded him on all sides away. Knowing there was little he could do to escape, he decided to take advantage of the company, and asked about the rules of the game. The girls happily filled him in on all they knew, which was quite a bit as they had had to listen to their boyfriends go on and on about sports at one time or another, and also provided him with a substantial amount of gossip about every single player. Harry's description particularly amused Draco: generous, clueless, sweet, drop-dead gorgeous, and tragically gay. Draco couldn't help but chuckle

" You know Harry then?" Katie asked.

" Yes. He's my boyfriend," Draco said.

" So you were right that night when you said you weren't my type. Figures," Katie said morosely. " Yet another perfect specimen lost to womankind."

" Sorry," Draco said.

" We'll live," Katie said teasingly. " Besides, my boyfriend's the jealous type, and I don't want him to think I've been flirting instead of watching him."

" You haven't been flirting? I'm crushed," Draco said, smiling.

" I said I don't want him to *think* I've been flirting," Katie said, winking broadly. Attention slowly returned to the match, and Draco relaxed enough to appreciate the rather rough game. At first, he watched all the players, trying to figure out the strategies, who the better players were, and that sort of thing, but eventually his focus became entirely fixated on Harry. Harry was not the best player, but he wasn't the worst either. Draco liked how lit up he looked, and he could hear Harry's rich laughter even from where he sat.

Draco shifted uncomfortably, becoming horribly aware that he was getting more then a little turned on watching Harry's exertions. It was beginning to rain; a fine gentle mist that made the field even muddier, and the player's clothes even wetter. Harry's shirt was plastered to his chest, his hair pushed back from his forehead in dark, wet ringlets. Draco noticed for the first time that Harry was wearing his contacts, so there was nothing hiding his brilliant eyes. Draco could see every muscle ripple as Harry drew back his arm to toss the ball down field. He could almost feel the powerful surge of Harry's legs as they sought purchase on the increasingly slippery terrain. Draco began willing the game to be over soon.

" Damn this weather," said Paul, Katie's boyfriend.

" Yeah, it's getting worse. Are we calling it quits for today?"

" Might as well, I have to get to work in half an hour anyway," chimed in another voice.

" Same time next week people?"

" Yeah."

The group began to splinter apart, people calling out their goodbyes as they made their way off the field. Tim, Harry, and Paul, walked off together. Paul was a big man, taller even then Tim, and just as strong. Harry had only met him once or twice, but he'd always seemed friendly, though a little disturbed by the whole gay issue. Paul was as straight as they came.

" Who's that with my Katie?" Paul asked suddenly. Harry and Tim followed Paul's line of sight, and saw Draco sitting calmly next to Katie. Harry allowed himself a moment to drink in the sight of his boyfriend, before realizing that this was probably not the best time to be distracted. " I'll kill him."

Paul began striding purposely across the field, forcing Tim and Harry to run after him.

" Paul, wait!" Harry cried out.

" Katie! What's going on?" Paul bellowed.

Katie remained totally unfazed, " Calm down, you lunk-head. This is Draco, a friend of mine."

By this time, Harry and Tim had caught up to Paul, and they were all standing at the bottom of the bleachers. Draco jumped down from the stands quickly, heading urgently towards Harry. Paul intercepted Draco.

" Who are you?" Paul asked demandingly. Draco, despite being several inches shorter then Paul and not nearly as muscled, didn't back away. In fact, Draco was about to say something rude and scathing, but Harry reached out and clapped a hand over Draco's mouth.

" He's with me Paul," Harry said.

" Doesn't mean I trust him," Paul said. Katie just rolled her eyes, and swatted Paul upside the head.

" No, I mean he's *with* me," Harry said emphatically. Seeing that his point was failing to reach Paul, Harry grabbed Draco's shoulders and started kissing him roughly. Paul coughed and looked away, turning a slightly green colour.

" See? Nothing to worry about. Now let's go buy me something pretty, since you just acted like such an idiot," Katie said. Katie may have been a small slip of a girl, but she managed to drag a

repentant Paul of the field with ease.

" Ahem," Tim grumbled loudly. Harry and Draco were still lip-locked, and it was beginning to reach a fervour that was inappropriate viewing for most audiences. Harry broke free, and smiled sheepishly,

" Sorry Tim."

Draco was still a little dazed from the kiss, and didn't say anything.

" No problem. See you guys tonight," Tim said. Draco began dragging Harry down the street towards their flat. They were all but running, and Harry figured he must be in trouble since Draco was being so impatient and because they weren't speaking. Maybe Draco hadn't appreciated being manhandled following the game? Harry did feel a little embarrassed for giving into the rash impulse, but his adrenaline had been running high from the exercise, and Draco had looked so good covered in that sheen of soft rain…

" You. Shower. Now," Draco said tersely. Harry was amazed to discover that they had reached the flat already. Feeling a little angry at Draco's gruff manner, Harry decided to take an extra long shower and use up all the hot water.

Having tossed his wet and muddy clothes into the hamper, Harry eventually stepped out of the bathroom, a bright blue towel wrapped around his waist. Before he had taken even three steps towards the bedroom, he was pushed roughly back against the bathroom's doorframe.

" What the…?" Harry managed to get out, before a hungry mouth made speech impossible. Harry's back hurt where it had hit the wall, and he was shivering slightly seeing as how he was dressed in only a towel while standing in the draughty hallway. The warm blond pressed against him, however, was more then enough compensation.

" I thought you'd never get out of there, you inconsiderate…"

" Me inconsiderate? You're the one who dragged me down the street, and shoved me into a shower as though you couldn't stand my presence. Why are you so mad at me?"

" Mad at you?" Draco started to laugh incredulously. " You think I'm mad at you?"

Harry nodded, not sure why Draco was laughing so hard. " Harry, watching you get pummelled by a large group of virile men – speaking of which, did they have to touch you so much?"

" It's called tackling, so yes, they do," Harry said.

" Whatever, anyway, watching you out there got me… well, shall we say excited? Then, in addition to that, you kiss the life out of me just seconds after the game, which didn't improve my problem much at all. So I was really hoping that after the game we could hurry home so you

could help me fix this little dilemma."

Draco pressed his hips against Harry's thigh, and Harry's eyes widened.

" Oh, so that's why we nearly broke our necks getting home. But why then did you make me take a shower?"

" Harry, anxious as I was, and, quite honestly, still am, you were filthy - covered in sweat and mud. But now you're all squeaky clean, and your skin's all nice and warm and fresh smelling… Harry, please?" Draco asked, knowing he sounded desperate, but too far along to care overly.

Harry pretended to think it over and watched Draco's face get even more stricken. Taking pity on Draco's obvious need, Harry said,

" I suppose it's the least I can do to make up for such a gross misunderstanding."

Harry didn't waste time undoing Draco's loose fitting jeans, preferring to simply slide his hand down the front of them, under the waistband of Draco's jeans and shorts.

" Oh," Draco said, exhaling sharply. Draco buried his head in the crook of Harry's neck, both arms around Harry's shoulders, in preparation of his knees growing weak.

Harry knew Draco wouldn't last long, not if he'd been telling the truth and had been hard ever since the rugby match. Still, it was quite flattering when, within moments, Draco shut his eyes tightly and came violently. It was even nicer when Draco needed to hold onto Harry for a moment to let the tremors subside.

" Worth the wait," Draco said quietly. He grinned at Harry, " Now why don't we take this to the bedroom, and get me out of these clothes?"

" And why would I want to do that?" Harry asked jokingly.

" Because otherwise you're just a naked man in a deserted hallway, and that's just pathetic," Draco said. Harry looked down, about to protest that he still had a towel on, when Draco reached out and snatched the towel away.

" Hey, give that back!" Harry said, and proceeded to chase Draco. Harry caught Draco rather easily (Draco was not trying very hard to escape, after all), and wrapped his arms tightly around Draco's waist. The towel lay forgotten on the floor as Harry kissed Draco's mouth, and began guiding him towards the bed.

All of a sudden, a loud buzzing noise filled the room. Draco and Harry both looked up, startled at the intrusion.

" The intercom," Harry muttered, slightly puzzled. Tim and Mike weren't due for several hours,

and they weren't expecting anyone else. " It's probably just some solicitor, hoping someone will let him past the security door. Ignore it; if it was important, they'd ring back."

Draco nodded and they tried to fall back into the rhythm of the kiss. The buzzer sounded again, and Harry cursed.

" I'd better see who it is. Don't forget where we are." Harry grabbed his towel and rushed to the intercom. Draco followed him out, curious about the identity of their visitor.

" Yes?" Harry snapped into the speaker. It was clear by his tone that he was more then a little irritated at the interruption.

" Harry? Is that you? Look we're sorry to just burst in on you like this, but we only got in yesterday, and we've got great news to tell you." The voice was immediately familiar to Harry.

" You sure this is how you work this thing, Herm? Shouldn't we be yelling?"

" I told you Ron, it's like a telephone. You don't have to yell," Hermione said, scolding Ron, and forgetting to release the intercom button so Harry ended up hearing every word. " Oops, now look at what you made me do! Harry, sorry. You still there?"

" Uh, yeah, I'm still here," Harry said. His shocked expression was mirrored perfectly by Draco's.

" So are you going to let us up? I mean we're not interrupting anything are we?" Hermione asked.

" No," Harry said, still finding it difficult to get his thoughts into order.

" Then what took you so long to answer?" Ron asked, shouting into the mouthpiece.

" I was… uh, on the balcony?" Harry said. Draco covered his face with his hands, disbelieving that anyone could lie so incredibly badly.

" Why didn't you just say you were getting out of the shower?" Draco hissed at him. Harry winced, realizing that Draco's excuse made a lot more sense.

" Harry? What's going on? Look, if this is a bad time…"

" Let them up," Draco whispered. " They're beginning to think something suspicious is going on anyways."

Harry nodded dumbly, before speaking into the intercom again, " No, sorry. I'm buzzing you up right now."

Harry hit the button that released the security door downstairs, and then turned to Draco.

" What do we do?" Harry said, panicked beyond belief. Here they were standing in the hallway, Harry nearly naked, Draco obviously in need of clean clothes, and no time to come up with a plan. In summation: they were screwed. " They'll be here in about thirty seconds!"

" Well, first thing we do is get you dressed," Draco said. He was also rather frantic, but he was trying to keep it together for Harry's sake. They ran to the bedroom, where Draco threw an outfit at Harry.

" Shit!" Draco muttered, seeing the state of his clothes. " I need a shower."

" A shower? Now? They're probably at the door!"

" No, actually, it's a good thing. You get dressed, and I'll go take a shower. You can explain to Ron and Hermione all about me while I'm occupied, so they have some chance of getting used to the idea before they see me. Can you handle that?"

Harry nodded, nearly falling over as he tried to pull his pants on. Draco grabbed some clean clothes and a towel, hurrying to the bathroom. Harry finished getting dressed, forgoing socks and not even attempting to brush his hair.

" Harry?" Draco asked, sticking his head back into the room, a strange expression on his face.

" Yes?"

" Just so I'm prepared, what are you going to tell them about us?"

Despite the mad rush, Harry took the time to smile and pause. " I'm going to tell them the truth: that we're together, and that I love you."

Draco blinked once, then twice, before hurrying across the room, and kissing Harry passionately.

" I love you too," Draco said, wishing they had chosen a better time to express themselves, but happy nonetheless. Harry kissed Draco back, and they forgot all about Hermione and Ron until there was a rather loud knock on the front door.

Harry and Draco leapt apart, Draco letting out a rather girlish scream (which he later emphatically denied ever making) before scrambling to the bathroom, tripping all the way. Harry stubbed his toe, and swore loudly as he hobbled to the front door. As Harry reached for the doorknob, all he could think was that things were about to get… interesting.

End of Part Ten

No promises on when the next chapter will be out. I have this pesky little thing called 'final term at university' – and if you can believe it, they actually expect you to do some work or something. I will try though, and as my roommate will testify, I DO spend an awful lot of time writing. Scenes to look forward to? Who doesn't want to see Tim, Mike, Ron, Hermione, Harry, and Draco in eighties style outfits and going to a club? Special thanks to 'the Red Mitten Girl' (you know who you are!) for letting me brainstorm that particular idea!

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Chapter: 11

This is just to get you in the (cheesy 80's) mood. If you aren't familiar with the song, well, aren't you lucky?

Look at the way

We gotta hide what we're doing

'Cause what would they say

If they ever knew and so we're

Runnin' just as fast as we can

Holdin' on to one another's hand

Tryin' to get away into the night

And then you put your arms around me
And we tumble to the ground
And then you say

I think we're alone now

There doesn't seem to be anyone around

I think we're alone now

The beating of our hearts

is the only sound

('I Think We're Alone Now' – Tiffany, 1987)

Fa la la! Sorry this is late – headaches, stress, depression, and general life got in my way, damn it! The chapter's nice and long, though, to try and make up for its tardiness. I'm really stunned by the nice things you've said about this story! I read it over, and think, oh my God, I'm a talentless hack! (Seriously, I say that. I say it so loud my roommate rolls her eyes and says, what's wrong with the story now? Scary, she knows me so well, that she knows immediately I'm not doing schoolwork!) Hopefully, I haven't disappointed, but there's a lot of 'stuff' to get through in this chapter. And, sad as I am to say it, we are nearing the end of the story! Three or four more chapters, I'm thinking. I'll try not to get depressed until then. (*Sniffle*) Anyway, Enjoy!

Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley. No matter how much time had gone by between visits, no matter where they had been or what had happened in the interim, no matter what small changes in appearance had occurred (different clothes or recent haircuts), the moment the three of them set eyes on each other, they started right back up again where they had left off, as though they had never been apart. Harry might have had a blond in his shower and a terribly guilty expression on his face, but the instant he saw Ron's beaming face, and Hermione's bright smile, all of that seemed to fade in importance.

" Harry! How are you?" Hermione asked happily. Surprising the both of them, Hermione pulled Harry into a short but fierce hug.

" Good to see you mate," Ron said, clapping Harry soundly on the shoulder. "We brought presents."

" Oh, now I really am glad to see you," Harry said, grinning. " Well, come on in. I can't wait to hear all about your trip. I mean it; I want to know about every single last detail."

" That sounds suspicious," Hermione said, a smile playing about her lips.

" Why whatever are you implying, Hermione dear?" Harry asked.

" It means, my darling Harry, that you usually don't give a darn about our travels, and suddenly you're asking questions? Seems a little fishy to me. Not to mention that it took you forever to answer the door and you've clearly just gotten out of the shower, and not been on the balcony as you said. In fact, I can still hear the water running, did you leave it on for a reason?"

Harry blinked slowly, and looked over at Ron. Ron shrugged, communicating that he was not responsible for Hermione's inquisitive nature, or her paranoia.

" Umm…" Harry looked around frantically, searching for a way to change the subject. He saw one; it was glinting brightly on Hermione's finger. " Oh my God, you're engaged!"

" Oh! I so wanted to be the one to tell you! I even won a bet with Ron, so that I would get to be the one who spoke first!" Hermione said, looking slightly miffed. She immediately brightened, "

Isn't it wonderful?"

Hermione held out her ring with a flourish, and Harry looked properly impressed.

" We wanted you to be the first person we told, after our families of course. Mum nearly fainted when we told her yesterday," Ron chimed in happily.

" It's great, it's really great. Congratulations to both of you," Harry said.

The three of them sat down in the living room, Hermione perched on the edge of an overstuffed armchair, Ron and Harry flopping onto opposite sides of the couch. Harry kept looking back and forth between his friends, trying to decide who seemed happiest. Harry eventually decided it was probably himself. " I just… wow. I mean, marriage. It sounds so… grown-up, or something."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry and Ron laughed. " Don't worry, Hermione tells me I haven't matured at all."

" Sad but true," Hermione said. She then leaned over and ruffled Ron's hair affectionately. Ron caught her hand and gave it a squeeze.

" Just think, soon it'll be mortgages and safe, slow cars with enough room for the kids and the groceries," Harry teased.

" Kids? Whoa, slow down," Ron said, sounding slightly panicked. Hermione took back her hand and smacked him upside the head lightly. Ron hurried to explain, "Not that I don't want all that. But… well, we're only engaged. We won't be getting married for at least a year."

Hermione sighed, " Okay, you're off the hook Ron, though I must say that your near panic attack was most unflattering. Anyway, we thought it best to wait until we both had a little more money and were more settled, before having a wedding."

" We're going to be living at the Burrow. It's just mum and Ginny there now, so there's lots of room, and mum dotes on 'Mione so much it's sickening."

" Oh Harry, it was hilarious. We told Molly we were getting married, and she just kept thanking me, over and over again."
" It's to be expected," Harry said sagely. " It must have been such a relief to find-out there was someone who would *willingly* marry Ron."

Hermione and Harry had to laugh at Ron's outraged expression. Ron turned smug eyes on Harry, and retorted, " I don't see why you're laughing, Harry. Who are you spending the rest of your life with, huh? This couch maybe?"

" Excuse me, but I'll have you know I'm in a very serious relationship," Harry replied.

" You'd better not be talking about coffee," Ron said warningly.

" No, really, there's someone. A human someone," Harry said blushing.

" Could you be more vague? A human something? Good grief. Now, what's her name?"

" His name," Hermione interjected. " Ron you promised me…"

" Sorry! It slipped out okay? I hear 'serious relationship', I think 'girl'. I didn't mean anything by it, really Harry. You know I don't care that you're… that you're… that you're gay." Ron looked immensely pleased with himself when he finally managed to get the last word out.

" Don't worry about it," Harry said.

" So?" Ron prodded.

" So what?" Harry asked.

" Honestly!" Hermione said. " We want to know about this boyfriend. How long have you known him; what's he do for a living; where did you meet; how serious are you, when do we get to meet him; why are you being so deliberately obtuse?"

" I think I speak for both of us when I say, what?" Harry asked.

" I've got it!"

" She's got what? Ron you have to help me translate; I haven't seen you two for months and I must have forgotten how to speak Hermion-ese."

" Please, I've never understood her either," Ron said. Harry and Ron shared a secret smile; Hermione didn't notice as she was too caught up in the fervour of her latest theory.

" Harry's in love! Think about it Ron. He lies to us when we arrive, though he's clearly happy to see us. He asks about our trip, and changes the subject whenever we ask for specifics. He's been nervy and weird since we got here," Hermione barely paused at this point when Harry broke into her tirade, trying to deny that he was acting at all odd. Neither Ron nor Hermione believed him, so Harry merely sighed and let Hermione continue, " And he seems just itching to tell us something. His house is clean, and despite how he's acting now, I think he's actually less stressed then normal, and dare I say it, happy. For goodness sake, his clothes even match!"

Ron's face paled, " Bloody hell, you are in love."

" Alright, alright! I'm in love. I'm goofily, stupidly, absolutely in love. Are you both satisfied now?"

" Not by half. For starters, when did this happen and why didn't you write to us about it? Have you at least told Sirius?"

" Well, there's a thought," Harry said sheepishly.

" Harry! He's your godfather, he'd want to know."

" I didn't do it on purpose! I just forgot. We're men – we can go years without speaking and still know where we stand."

" That's appalling!" Hermione admonished him. " And it doesn't explain why you didn't tell us."

" Well, umm, see about that… You both already know him, actually. And I had to be sure about him and me before I could talk about it to anyone else. You understand that, don't you?"

" We're your friends, Harry. That's all I'm trying to say," Hermione said, gentling her voice. " We know that after Voldemort, things between us all were a little strained. I'd hoped we'd moved past that, but now I find you've been keeping secret something that's obviously very important to you."

" We know him? Please don't tell me it's Mike," Ron said. Ron's comment broke the silence before it even had a chance to develop, and Harry smiled in relief.

" No, it's not Mike. He's still with Tim."

" Really? That's good news. I liked them; I thought they made a good couple," Hermione said. " But if it's not one of them, then it must be someone we know from Hogwart's."

Harry nodded slowly and tensely, " Before I say who, can I just ask that you not freak out?"

" We're not children anymore, Harry," Hermione said. " We're hardly going to resort to tantrums and name calling."

" But I don't just want you to tolerate him. I want… you're the most important people in my life, and I want you to be happy that I'm happy. And I really am. Happy, that is," Harry burbled. He was nervous; his words coming out in a mismatched tumble.

" You want our blessing," Ron supplied, his comment surprising for its gentleness, as well as its astuteness.

Hermione's hand fluttered up to her throat, " Oh goodness. He's here, isn't he? In the shower? I can't believe I didn't figure it out sooner."

" Please don't tell me you were in that shower together? There are some mental images I'm just not ready for," Ron pleaded. " I admit it – I'm weak!"

" We were not taking a shower together," Harry replied honestly. He flushed a little as he remembered exactly what he *had* been doing when they had arrived, but if Ron noticed, he didn't comment. " But he is here. We've been living together."

" So help me God, I will hex you right now if you don't tell me who he is immediately," Hermione said, getting annoyed with Harry's stalling tactics. Hermione was using her strictest voice, the one that always made both Harry and Ron want to confess to anything and everything.

" Draco Malfoy," Ron said, voice numb with shock. A completely stunned Hermione looked first at Ron, and then followed his gaze to the pale figure standing in the slight shadow of the doorway.

" Good guess," Harry said weakly. " You got it in one."

While in the shower, Draco had thought up several possible outcomes for this unexpected reunion, each one less plausible then the last. Draco wasn't so much worried that he'd cause a scene and horribly insult Harry's friends (though that was part of imagined outcome number fifty-seven); no, what scared Draco most was having to share Harry. Harry's friends carried pieces of Harry's heart; much as Draco did, and if they decided to pull on those pieces, it could very easily tear Harry apart. Draco was strong enough to deal with Harry's friends and their opinions of him, but he doubted very much that he would have the courage to let Harry go, even if it was for Harry's well being.

Draco stood in front of the slightly foggy bathroom mirror, psyching himself up. He punctuated his every assertion by jabbing his finger at his reflection.

" You are going to be charming. You will call them by their real names. You will say nothing remotely controversial and if that means being silent for the entire duration of their visit, then that's what you'll do. You will laugh at their jokes, even when they're not funny - in fact, especially when they're not funny. There will be no mention of rodent type animals, financial situations, or dental work. In short, you Draco Malfoy will be perfect." As an afterthought, he added, "Without being arrogant or superior." Draco watched as his expression in the mirror became even more despairing, " Yeah, I know. We are so screwed."

Knowing he was only delaying the inevitable, Draco brushed his shirt free of imaginary dust one final time and stepped out of the bathroom. He restrained himself from humming the death-march as he approached the living room. Though he had prepared himself, the sight that met his eyes still shook him hard. The three of them, so close together, reminiscent of their exclusive groupings at Hogwart's, made Draco feel distinctly out of place. They were talking quietly, yet intensely, and Draco hovered on the threshold, wondering how best to make his presence known. Never in his life had he been so unsure how to act.

Ron had been the first to notice Draco, and his subsequent shock made it clear to Draco that Harry hadn't quite gotten around to telling his friends about him. Inwardly cursing his bad

timing, Draco aimed a small, apologetic smile at Harry and slid further into the room. The stunned silence that had ensnared Ron and Hermione had apparently captured Harry as well. Draco could hear his footfalls on the soft carpet as he approached. Draco waited for some words of welcome or encouragement from Harry, or even an insult from Ron - anything to break the oppressive tension of the room. Draco began to feel guilty for disrupting the easy conversation that had previously existed between the three old friends; every moment that passed made him feel increasingly uncomfortable.

There was nowhere to sit, with Harry and Ron taking up the majority of the couch, and Hermione in the chair Draco usually sat in. Draco might have considered wedging himself next to Harry, wrapping his arms around his boyfriend companionably, had his courage and confidence not been ebbing at an all-time low. In the end, Draco folded his long legs underneath him, and sat cross-legged on the floor, on the far side of the coffee table. It was not a good position; not only was he now at a considerable height disadvantage, but now he faced the three of them like a criminal facing a jury.

" Uh, well. Ron, Hermione, you remember Draco?" Harry ventured. His voice reverberated in the small room.

" Kind-of hard to forget," Ron muttered, his response clearly not meant as a compliment. " Aren't you supposed to be in America?"

Draco lifted his gaze from its spot on the wall, his curiosity genuinely aroused, and inquired; " What do you mean?"

" It's been in the papers. Your father says you've spent the last few years studying at a boarding school overseas. But if you've been here… I know that's what I read though, because I remember saying to 'Mione that it would be just our luck to run into you while on our vacation," Ron said.

Draco probably would have glared at Ron for the slight, if he hadn't been so busy putting the pieces of the puzzle together in his mind.

" I suppose congratulations are in order then. You must be proud of your father," Hermione said, an obvious edge to her voice, though she was valiantly trying to remain cordial.

" I don't understand," Draco said. He directed his question to Harry, fearing to speak with Ron and Hermione in case he made some mistake. It was better that they thought he was being cool and aloof, then outright insulting.

" That makes two of us," Harry said, wondering at Draco's reticence and reluctance to ask questions. For a split second, Harry wished Ron and Hermione would disappear so that he could sit by Draco and reassure him. Harry didn't know if he would ever feel comfortable enough to kiss and hold Draco when there were other people present. The best Harry could do right now for Draco's uneasiness was to ask the questions Draco couldn't; "What's Lucius done now?"

It was Hermione's turn to look uncertain, " Don't you two read the Daily Prophet? He's running for Minister of Magic, virtually uncontested. It's been a rather lavish campaign, despite the lack of opposition, or so I gather. I haven't been keeping up with it much myself, not while we were in the States at any rate."

" I should have known," Draco said glumly. " And of course he would tell them I was away at boarding school. I thought he'd pick somewhere in Europe, but I suppose he thought 'overseas' had a nice ring to it; not to mention the fact it's vague enough that nobody would bother checking."

" He probably started the story the moment you were brought back home from Hogwart's. Then with the whole Voldemort debacle, I'm sure your absence wasn't questioned," Harry said.

Hermione was following the conversation between Draco and Harry with rapt interest, unconcerned for the moment that Draco was ignoring her presence. She could understand Draco not wanting to share all his private thoughts with people he barely knew.

" Was anything said about my mother, after she died?" Draco asked quietly.

Hermione bit her lip, " The story is that her suicide caused a rift between you and your father, which is why you remained at your school instead of intending her funeral. That's about it, though. I'm… I'm sorry," Hermione said sincerely.

" So if you weren't away at school, where have you been? And why are you here?" Ron asked. The question wasn't asked unkindly. It was a simple request for information, lacking any undertones of judgement.

Draco flitted his gaze over to Harry's. Harry nodded slightly, obviously prepared to take his cue from Draco, whatever he decided to tell them.

" My father… kept me prisoner. He wasn't too impressed when I refused the death mark. My mother helped me to escape, and then she killed herself. I came here, because I didn't know where else to go," Draco said. Draco told his tale as straightforwardly as was possible, withholding any emotion he might otherwise have expressed. He could see that Ron and Hermione were having a tough time taking in all the information. They had all this faulty knowledge about Draco from the newspapers, conflicting with the rather farfetched yet true account he had just told them. That was on top of finding out that their best friend was in love with their former schoolmate rival. Draco didn't blame them for needing a few moments to arrange their thoughts.

" I think I need a cup of tea," Hermione said eventually.

" Tea!" Draco said, slapping his forehead. How could he have forgotten that most basic of host duties? Besides, here was something he could do to keep himself busy and still be useful. After his mini-outburst, he realized that everyone was looking at him strangely. Ron even looked

amused. Draco flushed, " Sorry."

" No problem, I think we're all feeling a little… weird," Hermione said. She stood up, asking Harry, " Do you actually have tea this time? Or do I have to go searching through your cupboards like last time, only to come up with several cans of coke?"

" We have tea," Harry said.

" I'll get it," Draco said, expecting no argument and getting none. " Harry, I presume you want coffee instead?"

" Yes please. So does Ron," Harry said. Ron nodded that this was true, unsure he could speak properly. He was starting to feel like he had walked into some alternate universe. Draco Malfoy was about to bring him refreshments? What was the world coming to? Hermione was faring only slightly better; after managing to regain her seat, the most she could do was smile politely at Draco's offer.

" Two teas, and two coffees then," Draco said. He eagerly escaped to the relative safety of the kitchen where he took two deep, calming breaths, before preparing the drinks.

Draco put on a fresh pot of coffee for Ron and Harry, and set the kettle on to boil, all with an efficiency that belied his nervous state. All things considered, things weren't going that badly, Draco told himself.

Once the water was boiling, Draco switched off the stove, and sloshed a little of the water inside the teapot, warming it before he made the tea. He sliced a fresh, yellow lemon and placed the sections in a small bowl. He next got out the sugar-bowl, and a jug of cream, putting these items on a tray, along with the lemon. He put the teapot on the tray as well, with four cups and saucers, filling two of them with aromatic coffee. Finally, a plate of leftover baked goods, and a few remaining chocolate truffles that Draco kept for Harry's chocolate 'emergencies', and Draco was finished with his preparations.

This time when Draco walked into the living room, the conversation didn't grind to a halt. By unspoken agreement, the discussion had moved away from the serious subjects, to more pleasant and trivial ones. Draco put the tray down, and smacked Harry's hand automatically when Harry tried to grab the chocolate before anyone else.

" Manners, Harry," Draco teased. Harry tried to look innocent and contrite, but grabbed a truffle the moment Draco looked away. Draco watched as Hermione put a slice of lemon in her teacup before pouring herself some tea. She didn't put anything else in it, and Draco was quietly amused that they took their tea the exact same way. Draco was not as amused when Ron proceeded to dump loads of sugar and cream into his coffee. Given a choice, Draco would rather share traits with Hermione then Ron.

" Oh it's been ages since I've had a proper cup of tea. You would not believe some of the stuff

they drink in America," Hermione said, clearly grateful for her beverage. The mood began to lighten, which became noticeable when Hermione said, " Which reminds me, you should open your gift Harry."

Hermione stood up and retrieved a medium sized package from her bags that had been left by the front door. Harry received the box happily, surprised at the weight of it. He broke the strings keeping the cardboard lid shut, and opened the box, revealing its contents. Harry laughed,

" You brought me coffee," Harry said.

" Not just any coffee; coffee from all over. Mostly Seattle though, they have a thing for the bean. And we got you a mug too," Ron said. Harry removed the rather large cactus shaped mug that had 'Everything's Big in Texas' written out in red letters along the side.

" Thanks, it's great;" Harry said. He dumped his current coffee into the new mug with a grin.

" You know, if Harry had told us he was seeing someone, we would have picked up something for you as well, Draco. *If* he had told us, that is," Hermione said, chiding Harry with a look. " I don't suppose you want a pen from Niagara Falls? You twist it and it actually looks like the water is falling."

Hermione handed him the cheerful blue pen, and Draco amused himself turning the plastic cylinder over and over again, watching the water tumbling down.

" Draco likes pens, actually," Harry supplied.

" This is true," Draco admitted, putting the pen down at last. " Thank you."

" Glad you like it," Hermione said.

Silence fell again, but it was nowhere near as tense as it had been. Harry let himself relax somewhat, no longer fearing a brawl between Ron and Draco, or a screaming match between Draco and Hermione. Harry could tell that Draco was trying hard to make a good impression, and Harry was touched by the effort. Harry hoped his friends would not see Draco's strict behaviour as arrogance. Draco must have felt Harry's gaze because he looked up, and returned Harry's soft smile.

" So what are your plans?" Harry asked.

" Well, we were going to stay with you for a few days, but it might be awkward… We didn't know you had company, you see. I suppose we'll get a hotel…"

" Of course you'll stay here," Harry said. " It's not a problem." Draco nodded, but then a thought occurred to him,

" What about Mike and Tim? They're coming over later, remember?"

" Oh right," Harry said. He thought for a moment, before a decidedly mischievous thought came to him. " They could always come with us."

Draco caught onto Harry's idea almost instantly, " I'm sure if we rang Mike, he could come up with a few more costumes."

" Mike and Tim have met Ron and Hermione before so it shouldn't be too hard for Mike to think of something appropriate," Harry said, rubbing his palms together.

" Okay, stop speaking in code you two. I know I'm going to regret this, but what are you talking about?"

" We have plans to go out with Tim and Mike to a club tonight. It's a theme night put on by the university, and if you guys wanted to come along, you'd be welcome," Harry explained.

Ron seemed to like the idea, but Hermione was a little more mistrustful. " Why do you look so smug, then? Just what sort-of theme are we talking about?"

" The eighties," Harry said lightly.

" As in the nineteen eighties? As in teased and hair-sprayed fringes, legwarmers, neon-coloured parachute pants, and ripped, acid-wash jeans? As in movies starring the Brat Pack in detention, and songs by bands called 'Bananarama'? That eighties?" Hermione asked.

" That would be the one," Harry said, laughing. " So you want to?"

Hermione grinned, " Harry, you are speaking my language."

" Do you think that language could be English? Because I still don't know what you two are blathering about."

Hermione and Harry shared a look and laughed. " Don't worry, Ron. It's just a few references to muggle pop-culture."

" If you say so," Ron said, clearly still nervous.

" I'll give Mike a ring right now then," Harry said. Harry dialled the number he knew by heart, and got a very enthusiastic Mike on the other end. Mike agreed to bring a few more outfits, and even as Harry was hanging up, Mike was tossing out possible costume suggestions.

" Damn, I should start getting dinner ready," Draco said, catching sight of the time.

" You're cooking?" Ron asked incredulously, eyes going round. " Do you even know how?"

" You should know, you ate all the biscuits I made," Draco said defensively. Draco had replied sharper then intended to Ron's inoffensive question, and he cringed slightly, as he saw Ron clench his jaw in anger.

" Really? Those were really good," Hermione said quickly, hoping to smooth over the small rough patch. Hermione affectionately patted Harry's stomach. " No wonder Harry's put on a few pounds."

" Hey, are you saying I'm chubby?"

" No, I'm saying you're not the half-starved scrawn I've grown accustomed to," Hermione said. Draco snorted with laughter, and tried to cover it up with a cough.

" Well, I blame Draco, who insists that caffeine is not a food group," Harry said. " Tim and Mike are coming for dinner tonight, so that makes six of us. Is there going to be enough food, Draco?"

" We're going to need some more wine," Draco said, taking inventory of the kitchen.

" Okay, anything else?"

" No. You know I make too much food anyway, two more people will hardly make a difference," Draco replied. Hermione had trailed after Harry and Draco, curious about just how adept Draco had become in a muggle kitchen.

" It's really nice of you to do this for us," Hermione said.

" Please, Draco's dying for a chance to show-off. Got a new pastry bag and everything," Harry said, sticking his tongue out when Draco glowered at him. " Hey Ron, I'm going out to pick up some wine, you want to come?"

" Sure," Ron said loudly from the living room.

" Hermione?"

" No thanks, I'll stay here, see if Draco needs a hand," Hermione said. All three of them were surprised at the ease with which Hermione had called Draco by name. Harry positively glowed.

" Fine," Harry agreed. He put on his shoes and grabbed his wallet. Just before leaving he stuck his head back into the kitchen. " It's mostly seafood, so a white wine, right?"

" He can be taught," Draco said, clasping his hands together and pretending to thank some deity. " Actually, it's one of the few times you can get away with either. It's kind-of an Italian style meal, so you might as well pick up a red as well."

" Whatever you say," Harry said, leaning over and kissing Draco lightly. It was Harry's standard goodbye kiss, an action he had gotten so accustomed to that Harry forgot to be self-conscious about it, despite the fact that they had an audience. Blushing slightly at Hermione's raised eyebrow, Harry bid a hasty retreat, leaving Draco to handle any comments.

Draco found that without Harry to act as a buffer, he didn't know what to say to Hermione. Asking about her trip or her engagement to Ron sounded too personal, as though they were old friends instead of former enemies, whereas offering an apology for all the times he had called her the derogatory 'mudblood' seemed a tad extreme.

" Can I help you with anything?" Hermione asked.

" Would you mind making a salad?" Draco said. Hermione nodded, and soon a rhythmic chopping noise accompanied the sounds of bubbling liquids and sizzling pans.

" Sounds like a potions lab," Hermione remarked.

Draco smiled, adding spice to his sauce. " I thought the exact same thing when I started cooking. It was reassuring having something familiar to occupy me while I was… while I was here."

Hermione suspected there was more to that story, but didn't press. It was strange standing next to Draco Malfoy, cooking dinner. Strange, but not entirely unpleasant. Draco was quiet, but he didn't seem to resent Hermione being around. Hermione supplied the conversation, and she told him about the universities of magic she had visited while in North America.

" The schools are really much better organized then anything I've seen in Europe. I suppose it's not that surprising. The system of apprenticeship here is really first rate, so it makes sense that they wouldn't be too eager to change it, and really why would they? But because our way is so dependent on tradition, it would be almost impossible to duplicate overseas. So they saw a need, and adapted the university system for themselves, and I think it has been entirely successful."

" But you still decided to take an apprenticeship here?"

" In the end, I simply didn't want to be away from Ron and my parents, just for an education. Besides, I'm going to be apprenticed to Professor McGonagall, and I couldn't have hoped for a better appointment, plus a chance to work at the new Hogwarts… well, I think it's too good an opportunity to pass up on."

" And Ron?"

" He's working on his degree by correspondence. Seeing me be able to practice magic freely I think is what provided the motivation. We're staying with his mum. Ron doesn't say it, but I think he worries about her. When Arthur died – that's Ron's father – she still had Ginny and the twins to look after her, but now Ginny's thinking of attending Hogwarts, and the twins moved out, so Ron's trying to be more available. Further reason for us to stay in England, I suppose."

Hermione realized she had been monopolizing most of the conversation, talking nearly exclusively about herself and Ron. She would have never figured Draco as a good listener, but then, the Draco she was conversing with now seemed far more mature and subdued then the Draco of memory. He didn't look that different: same white-blonde hair, same aristocratic features, same pale skin. Thinking objectively, she could admit he was rather attractive. Hermione couldn't help but consider the sort-of couple Harry and Draco would make. Far from complimentary, and not exactly contrasting, she thought. Rather Harry and Draco were both so unique, that she imagined that together they would look rather exceptional. Something rare, exotic, and infinitely special. She wondered if either of them even knew the reaction they could cause.

" I still hate all the things you did to us," Hermione said, choosing to voice one of her concerns.

" You should," Draco said calmly.

" But if Harry wants to forgive and forget, then I'm prepared to do no less," Hermione said. Draco looked at her, knowing she meant what she said. " I think we're more alike then I realized. When I first met Harry, I was so determined to impress him, to prove that I was just as good as he was, even if my parents were muggles. I wanted to prove that I wasn't daunted by his celebrity like everyone else, but I went too far, and came off looking like a bossy, know-it-all. I think that a lot of what you did was for the same goal. You tried so hard to prove you were just as important as Harry, just as worthy an equal, that you didn't even realize that Harry wasn't trying to compete. Harry only ever wanted a normal life, and yet we both thought it couldn't be that simple, and overdid it."

" You at least had the sense to learn from your mistakes the first time. Did you just come up with this theory?" Draco asked.

" I've thought about it a lot in regards to myself. I've only just noticed how well it can be applied to you," Hermione said. " I had a whole speech planned for when I met Harry's first real boyfriend, you know."

" Always prepared, aren't you?"

" It's all about how if Harry got hurt, that I would come after whomever was responsible," Hermione said seriously. Draco didn't reply, though his silence was acceptance enough. " What are you getting out of this Draco?"

Draco turned to look at her, surprised that she was being so blunt. " You of all people should know how easy it is to fall in love with Harry, and how hard it is to stop."

" You love him?"

" Yes," Draco said.

" Then I guess I don't need to say the rest of my speech, do I?"

Draco shook his head no. " But I'm glad we had this conversation."

Hermione nodded, and they went back to preparing the meal. Hermione still had a few doubts in her mind, but she was willing to give Draco a chance. So far the only interactions she had observed between Harry and Draco had been positive ones; it was definitely a good sign.

Harry and Ron returned with the wine, talking and laughing between themselves like the best friends they were. Ron had conveniently pushed the idea of Draco and Harry as a couple to the very back of his mind. If he thought about it too much he was likely to be hurt that Harry had chosen to date someone whom Ron firmly disliked, or worse, was likely to act on his temper and pummel Draco's smug face into the ground – neither of which would improve the situation. Denial really did seem to be the best course of action, and so far it was working. Ron and Harry's friendship was much as it had always been (they never had been very touchy-feely after all), and Ron saw no reason to complicate matters by bringing Draco into the equation.

Harry stole two more cups of coffee from the kitchen and took them into the living room. Hermione ended up in the living room as well, where she and Ron showed Harry their travel photos, and talked about their trip, while Draco worked on in the kitchen.

Draco's nervousness returned, as he was once again unintentionally excluded from the group. It was with some relief that he heard the intercom start to buzz early in the evening. Draco was definitely looking forward to the added distraction that Mike and Tim were sure to provide.

" We're here!" Mike said loudly, his cheerful voice ricocheting off the hallway walls through the whole flat. " Where's that luscious redhead?"

Mike strolled into the living room, leaving Tim to hang-up their coats and carry the bags of costumes they had brought.

" Hello Mike," Ron said nervously, taking a firm grip of Hermione's hand.

" There he is. Still think your straight?"

" Yes. I mean, I am still straight. And I'm engaged," Ron threw in hastily.

" More's the pity. Still, I can hardly blame you. What man could resist the lures of the lovely Lady Hermione?" Mike asked rhetorically. Mike grinned and kissed the back of Hermione's hand, while she giggled.

" Good to see you haven't changed Mike," Hermione said.

" I figure why mess with perfection? Now, since sadly you're both off the market that leaves me

only… Draco! Where are you babe? Or has Harry discovered our illicit affair and locked you in the dungeon? Not that I'm adverse to bondage."

Mike hurried to the kitchen, intent upon his blond prey, when Tim loomed in front of him, and prevented him from pouncing.

" Need I remind you that you also are off the market?" Tim asked.

" Aw Tim, you know I only say stuff like that because I like seeing you get all jealous and protective," Mike said, fluttering his eyelids innocently.

" You don't think much of my intelligence do you?" Tim asked. He looked over Mike's head, and nodded at Harry's friends. " Nice to see you again Ron, Hermione. Congratulations on your engagement."

" Thanks Tim. Congrats to you for surviving with Mike this long," Ron said, shaking Tim's proffered hand, and wincing only slightly at the strong grip.

Mike meanwhile had slipped around Tim, and was whispering to Draco that he'd only been kidding when he'd said what he had to Tim - Mike insisted that he really was prepared to run-away with Draco as soon as they found a way of ditching Tim and Harry.

" Stop trying to steal my boyfriend," Harry said, chuckling. Harry wrapped protective arms around Draco's waist, a gesture that pleased Draco an inordinate amount. Draco hugged Harry more securely against his body, needing the affection even if it meant appearing more clingy then usual. It was too stressful screening his every word and action for possible insult, and Draco was tired of feeling left out. With Harry, everything was easy; it was dealing with everyone else that was the hard part.

" Fine! I guess that means I'm stuck with Tim then," Mike said, pretending it was a hardship. " A gorgeous, smart, supportive, sexy boyfriend. Oh what a calamity!"

Draco snickered, Harry laughed outright, Tim looked decidedly nonplussed, and Ron hid behind Hermione as though fearing that if he looked amused, Mike would think he was interested.

" I brought you a present Harry. Well, actually it's for both you and Draco," Mike said.

Draco's eyes lit up at the idea of a present, even as Harry was protesting that Mike didn't have to buy them anything. Mike produced a bright purple gift bag, with loads of pink and white tissue paper sticking out of the top.

" Wrap this yourself, Mike?" Draco asked dryly.

" Yes, why?" Mike asked innocently. Draco just shook his head, as Harry lifted away some of the tissue paper. Suddenly Harry was stuffing tissue paper back into the bag, a violent flush

spreading over his face.

" You could have warned me," Harry hissed at Tim.

" I wanted to, but Mike said I wasn't to spoil his fun," Tim said with a shrug.

" Come on Harry, show everyone!" Mike said.

" No. Thanks for the present, but I think I'll finish opening it later, if you don't mind," Harry said.

" What is it Harry?" Hermione asked, the curiosity nearly killing her.

" A book," Harry said tersely.

" Really? Maybe I've read it…"

Mike burst out laughing, and even Tim had difficulty keeping a straight face. Harry's face got even redder, if that was possible.

" Trust me, you haven't read this book, and if you have, I sincerely don't want to hear about it," Harry said. Harry took the gift bag, tossed it onto his bed, and then firmly shut his bedroom door. Draco was curious about the present too, but unlike Hermione, Draco knew he was more likely to get answers if he pretended to be disinterested, and later snuck in to see the contents for himself. Besides, Mike had said it was for both of them, so he had some right to look, didn't he?

" Well if nobody else is going to humiliate Harry, we might as well eat. Open the wine, would you Harry?" Draco said.

In moments the hosts had the dinnerware laid, the wine poured, and the table nearly groaning under the weight of the meal. The smells of garlic and oregano hung heavy on the air; vibrantly coloured roasted vegetables contrasted tantalizingly with thick creams and golden domes of bread. The meal smelled delicious, and tasted even better. Even though Draco had made enough food to feed them all twice over, they still managed to polish of a surprising number of platters. Afterwards, everyone was pleasantly overstuffed and sipping contentedly on the last of the wine.

They may have been full to the point of bursting, but a mocha-almond cheesecake was too hard to resist, and everyone had to try at least one slice, with Ron and Tim eating three apiece. Draco decided that if he couldn't win over Ron's approval the hard way, he could always bribe him with food.

Harry shooed Draco out of the kitchen after they were finished eating, not letting him do any of the dishes. Ron 'volunteered' to help with clean up, after Hermione gave him a no-nonsense shove towards the sink.

" Oooh, we can start on costumes then," Mike chirped. He jumped up and collected the bags he

had brought; sorting them according to some system only he could understand. Mike was beyond excited at the prospect of dressing up his friends. Deciding he needed some music to really set the tone, Mike set up Harry's CD player, and popped in a David Bowie album.

" I so wanted to dress you as David Bowie," Mike confessed to Draco. " But in the end, I decided Billy Idol would get you to reveal more skin, so it was a simple case of math really."

Hermione laughed, " What about me and Ron? Oh, and I'm sorry for springing this on you so suddenly."

" I'm happy to do it. It was really hard to think of something for Ron though. You will of course be going as Madonna – the 'like a virgin' version, but Ron… Ron, I've decided will be sporting the only thing Flock of Seagulls ever truly made famous - the hairdo."

Ron nearly dropped the plate he'd been drying when he heard Hermione start howling with laughter in the other room. " I don't like the sound of that, mate."

" Me neither, Ron. If I were you, I'd be afraid. Very afraid," Harry said. He handed Ron another plate and they went back to work, both shivering as Hermione's laughter continued to ring in their ears.

" Oh my, I have to get a picture of that. And what about yourselves?"

Mike pouted slightly, " Tim vetoed every single one of my ideas. He's going to be RG of the eighties."

" RG?"

" Random Guy," Tim explained. " I'll submit to having my hair fluffed, and my coat collar turned up, but I had to draw the line somewhere. Mike wanted me to go as one of the members of 'WHAM' – as if that wasn't totally obvious."

" So little faith he has in me. And you've gotta have faith," Mike said jokingly, wondering if anyone would get the reference. " I am going as Michael Jackson, the red thriller outfit to be precise, and Harry is going as Bruce Springsteen for the sole reason that I want to see him in really tight, torn jeans."

Draco silently agreed with that particular desire, and began looking forward to their night out with something less then complete abhorrence. Mike handed Draco and Hermione their costumes; Hermione slipped into the bathroom to change, some part of her brain idly wondering why Mike had a skirt, blouse, black leggings, and pantyhose on hand. Draco shut himself inside the bedroom, hurriedly pulling on the black leather pants, the tight white tank top, and even tighter black leather vest with its multitude of shiny zippers and tags. Casting a quick glance at the bedroom door to see if it was still closed, Draco then turned his attention to the present that beckoned to him, still wrapped in all its gaudy glory and lying innocently on the bedspread.

It turned out it really was a book. Somewhat disappointed, Draco flipped it right side up to read the title. ' The Every Gay Man's Guide to Sex. New edition! Full colour illustrations! More Advanced Positions!' No wonder Harry hadn't wanted to share this with everyone, Draco thought, a pink tinge to his cheeks.

" Draco? You decent? I have to change," Harry said from the other side of the bedroom door. In a moment of panic, Draco shoved the bag and the book under the bed.

" Yeah, you can open the door," Draco replied. Draco stood up as Harry came in, preparing to go back to the living room.

" Is that what you're wearing?" Harry squeaked.

" Don't you dare laugh! You know I didn't pick this out myself…" Draco trailed off as he realized Harry was on the verge of either a heart attack or drool. Both were rather encouraging reactions. " Why, you like it Harry?" Draco asked seductively. Harry nodded dumbly, eyes unblinking. " You don't think the pants are too tight, do you?"

Harry shook his head so vehemently that his glasses threatened to come off. Draco sauntered over to him, wary in case all the stimulation made Harry faint.

" Harry?" Draco asked, voice soft and lilting, his hot breath ghosting over Harry's ear. " When are we leaving to go out?"

Harry's brain was having trouble processing anything beyond 'leather is good', so it took him a moment to realize a response was expected of him.

" Soon," Harry managed.

" Too bad," Draco purred, drawing away from Harry. Harry instinctively leaned forwards, trying to get closer again to Draco, and nearly stumbled. " Yes, it's such a shame we don't have time to fool around."

With that, Draco strutted out of the room, smirking when he heard a dull thumping noise emanating from inside the bedroom. Draco correctly deduced that Harry was taking his frustrations out against the wall with his head.

Mike screamed like a teenage girl when Draco's leather clad form emerged, but managed to hold himself together long enough to put the finishing touches on Draco's costume. A little black eyeliner, some silver and leather necklaces and bracelets, and the last touch, some gel to make Draco's hair a little bit spiky.

" Hello hair gel, my old friend," Draco said, dipping his fingers in the slimy substance while Mike laboured over getting the blond spikes just right.

" What?"

" Never mind," Draco said.

Draco later wished he hadn't teased Harry so much in the bedroom, for when Harry stepped out in skin-tight blue jeans, which had strategically placed rips allowing glimpses of smooth gold flesh, and a tight white T-shirt, Draco felt his leather pants becoming uncomfortably warm. Mike added a red bandana around Harry's head, and Harry put his contact lenses in, completing the transformation. Draco began thinking of ways to kidnap Harry and have his wicked way with him. What everyone else looked like was irrelevant, in Draco's opinion.

That is, until they all got a good look at Ron's hair. Most of it was brushed forward, and hanging in a point over his face, and he had two little red 'horns' on the side of his head. Hermione stopped laughing just long enough to tell Ron to stop whining because he was going precisely as is. Hermione was wearing a puffy, multicoloured skirt overtop of black leggings and ankle boots, black lace gloves, a loose dress shirt under a vest, and her bushy hair was encouraged to go wild, held back only slightly by a headband. Mike was literally hopping in place, his red leather outfit, and fingerless gloves making him even more hyper then customary (to the chagrin of those within striking distance). Tim seemed the most comfortable of them all, in his black rayon trench coat with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and the coat's collar turned up. Underneath he was wearing a blue shirt with wide red lapels, and jeans that were rolled at the bottom. Mike shook his head at his boyfriend's lack of creativity.

They left the flat in high spirits, enjoying the comments and stares from their fellow passengers on the train they took to the club. When they arrived, the club was already bustling with business, and they had to wait in line before they finally got inside. Through it all, Draco remained close to Harry, not wanting to get lost in the crowd. The club was jammed, and it was nearly impossible to make out individual faces in the sea of people. The costumes ranged from elaborate to non-existent, with their group falling somewhere in between the two extremes. Despite the fact that Draco had never heard much muggle music before coming to live with Harry, he found most of the songs were familiar. Draco mentioned this to Mike.

" Oh no. Don't tell me you've been subjected to Harry's taste in music too?"

Draco narrowed his eyes at Harry. Harry suddenly seemed to find his shoelaces interesting, and stared at them, refusing to answer Draco's unspoken question. " Should I take it then that Harry is not to be trusted when it comes to music?"

" Well, it's possible you've escaped unscathed," Mike said, though he clearly thought it was unlikely. " Just promise me that if he ever puts on 'Tiffany' that you put a stop to the insanity immediately."

" Too late," Draco said, jabbing Harry in the shoulder. Harry at least had the good grace to blush.

" Oh, Harry. Please not Tiffany," Hermione said pleadingly.

" Well, would you look at that. I've finished my drink," Harry said quickly. Actually there was about half a bottle left, but he guzzled this faster then should have been possible, and stood up. " I'd love to stay and answer these accusations, but first I have to get a drink. Anyone else need anything? No? Okay then."

Harry dashed off into the crowd before any of them could say a single word. Mike and Hermione commiserated, before reassuring Draco that the damage was unlikely to be permanent. Harry did eventually return, and he was laden down with drinks for everyone (having decided he would get everyone drunk, rather then explain himself). Eventually the combination of alcohol, cheesy yet addicting music, and costumes, persuaded the group onto the dance floor. Most of them rationalized that they were already humiliated by their costumes, so they might as well go crazy.

The dance floor was crowded and boisterous, with everyone bumping into everyone else, and there was no real sense of whom was dancing with whom. Thus it was that Draco somehow found himself next to Hermione, who was flushed, red from the exertion. Her words were only partly slurred as she said loudly in Draco's ear,

" You know what I said about you hurting Harry?" Draco nodded; it was easier then trying to speak over the music. " The same thing goes for you. If that idiot does something to you, then I'll kill him, okay?"

Draco grinned his first real smile at Hermione ever. " Playing both sides? How positively Slytherin of you!"

Draco gripped Hermione's hands and led her into a spin. If either of them thought this was odd, they blamed it on too many Jell-O-shooters.

" You're sure he's gay, right?" Ron yelled at Harry. Harry turned somewhat glassy eyes towards his best friend.

" What?"

Ron indicated with his hand, or at least tried to. Harry got the general direction, and soon caught sight of Draco and Hermione actually laughing with each other.

" I just know he loves me," Harry said. Ron pretended to stick his fingers down his throat, and continued to watch his fiancée.

It wasn't long before Mike approached the duo and asked to cut in. Draco agreed, of course, but was clearly surprised when Mike grabbed him, instead of Hermione. Hermione was spun around and ended up with Tim. Tim laughed, picked her up easily, and deposited her with Ron, just as a slow song started. Ron grabbed hold of Hermione tightly, and decided he was not going to let her go for the rest of the evening.

Tim wandered off, never being one to enjoy the slower dances, and Mike abandoned Draco in favour of a drink with his boyfriend. Tim was secretly pleased to have Mike come running after him, and made a surprising gesture of public affection by kissing Mike quite passionately on the edge of the dance floor.

" Your boyfriend needs you," Hermione said to Harry. Harry glanced over, and saw that Draco was searching the crowd for him.

" You know I don't slow dance," Harry said, feeling a flush stealing over his skin.

Hermione saw that Draco was getting a little panicked, not being able to see anyone he knew nearby because of the gloom. She narrowed her eyes at Harry; " You wouldn't be avoiding a dance with your boyfriend, just because of Ron and I, would you?"

" No," Harry replied, swallowing nervously. " Don't be silly."

" Good. Because not only would it be a mean way of treating Draco, but it would be insulting to both Ron and I to assume that we couldn't handle it," Hermione said. " Do you catch my drift?"

" That's really not the…"

" Dance with the git, already," Ron snapped at him. Harry shut his protesting mouth, and began making his way through the crowd.

" There you are," Draco said, relief evident in his voice. " Do you want to go back to the table with Mike and Tim?"

" No," Harry said. Harry placed his hands on Draco's hips and pulled their bodies close together.

Draco's eyes lit up, " I'd ask how drunk you are, but I really don't care."

" Are you taking advantage of me then?" Harry asked. His tone implied that it didn't matter if that was the case.

" Only if you ask nice," Draco said, stepping further into Harry's arms. As close as they were, Draco could detect a recognizable bulge. " Wow, you really are happy to see me. Do you have a thing for this Billy Idol character?"

" Uh uh," Harry mumbled, burying his head against Draco's shoulder. " Though I like the eye-liner more then I thought I would."

" Well, don't expect to see it again. It itches like crazy," Draco said, running fingers through Harry's hair. " I only did it because Mike looked so heartbroken when I said no the first time."

Harry laughed, and the feeling of Harry's warm breath against Draco's neck made him shiver. Even though the next song to start up was a fast one, Harry and Draco kept right on as they were, slowly swaying, held closely together.

" You know Ron, if you're thinking that Harry's relationship with Draco is just a temporary lapse in sanity on Harry's part, then I think you're going to be sorely disappointed," Hermione said.

Ron inwardly cursed that his girlfriend was so perceptive. Trust her to figure out Ron's whole denial-based plan.

" But it's Malfoy," Ron said, as if that explained everything. " Having sex with someone as anal-retentive as Draco Malfoy could be dangerous. Do you think Harry has thought about that?"

" Ron, that is not remotely funny," Hermione said, clapping a hand over her mouth to keep the inappropriate laughter from showing. " Okay, maybe it is a little. 'The hidden dangers of having a type A, anal-retentive personality'. Do I even want to know where you come up with this stuff?"

Ron shrugged, " Fred and George, mostly."

" I should have guessed. Anyway, that's all beside the point, as we are not trying to dissuade Harry from his choice."

" We aren't?"

" No, we're not," Hermione said strongly." Just look at the two of them over there. How happy Harry is."

Ron reluctantly looked up and across the dance area, and saw Harry and Draco curled into one another. The couple turned slightly, and Ron had to close his eyes. " Good Lord, I did NOT need to see that."

" Nonsense. I think they look sweet," Hermione said.

" But Hermione, Malfoy's hands are on Harry's arse! Why, oh why, did I have to see that? I'm sorry eyes," Ron snivelled.

Hermione had not seen that aspect, but quickly realized Ron was speaking the truth. She then started to giggle, " Oh, don't worry so much. I don't think it's even sexual. Draco looks more like he's trying to shield Harry's butt from anyone who might be looking. If you'd look at him, you'd see Draco's being rather protective of Harry."

" One look was enough, thank you," Ron said, keeping his eyes firmly shut.

Hermione gave a weary sigh, " Ron? Why don't you go back into denial again? I think it was easier on me."

" Yes! I was right! Score one for denial!" Ron said gleefully. Hermione started running a mantra in her head, the one she had developed early on in her relationship with Ron: his heart's in the right place, so you can't kill him.

" I wonder what Hermione's muttering?" Draco asked idly.

" Probably about how it wouldn't be right to kill Ron. She says it fairly often," Harry said. Harry didn't even need to look at Ron and Hermione to form this answer. " Just so I know, your hands on my butt aren't an attempt to gross Ron out, are they?"

" Harry! I would never do something so fiendish," Draco said, pretending to be shocked. " I'll have you know I'm covering a rather indecently placed rip in your jeans – damn that Mike. Freaking out Ron is just a bonus."

End of Chapter Eleven – Review if you can, as I have no life outside writing! Next chapter: a little bit of Dudley, a little more of Ron and Hermione, and why did I have Mike bring that present?

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Chapter: 12

Eep! I swore up and down I'd have this finished last week but obviously… Not much to say, but I recommend you read the last part of this in an extremely hyper, and silly mood! Enjoy!

Last call had come and gone, and the volume of the club's sound system had been systematically lowered so that now there was barely a hum of music, instead of the driving beat of earlier. Most of the crowd had left, with only a few stragglers still swaying sleepily on the dance floor. Harry looked across the table, which was littered with a rather shameful amount of glasses and bottles, at the rest of the group. Mike was all but sleeping, his head on the filthy table, his cheek avoiding a small puddle of stale beer by pure chance. Tim was staring straight ahead at the wall, thoughts elsewhere, while Draco was fiddling with his spiked hair, the picture of boredom. Hermione and Ron sat next to one another, propping each other up.

" Time to go?" Harry asked. Mike lifted his head and yawned, before whining piteously,

" It's over already?" Tim just nodded in response.

They trooped out into the night tired, but happy. The cool night air of early morning seemed to perk Mike up, and while they walked towards the underground, Mike regaled the group with stories from his 'illustrious' past, making sure he enunciated the more lewd comments carefully

for Ron's benefit. Ron was abhorred to discover he was laughing, but he rationalized that it was not that Mike was funny, but rather that Hermione was giggling, and it would be rude if she were the only one doing so. Tim, of course, wasn't laughing, merely smiling benignly, since he was already familiar with Mike's stories, as was Harry who grinned nonetheless. Draco was the only one not listening to Mike's ramblings, as he walked as silent as a shadow next to Harry. Draco usually did find Mike amusing, and he did appreciate how discomfited Ron appeared, but he was lost in his thoughts.

How ridiculous his worries from earlier seemed. Harry wasn't going to ignore him now that his friends were around; if anything, the presence of Ron and Hermione made Harry more secure, and more inclined to demonstrate his affection. Draco benefited from this surge of confidence in more ways then one. Harry's rich laughter washed over Draco's senses, and sent tingles down his spine. Beneath the glow of a street lamp, Draco glanced at his partner, feeling as much as seeing the contentment that radiated from Harry. Caught by the mellow softness of the night, Draco felt a smile stealing across his face, and he reached out surreptitiously, clasping Harry's hand gently in his own. Harry turned to look at him, surprise written over his features.

" If you dare say a word, they'll never find your body," Draco threatened gruffly.

" You're cute when you're trying to be evil," Harry said impishly. Draco frowned at the word cute, but was soon smiling again despite himself, as Harry gave their joined hands a squeeze.

" God damn queers," said a harsh voice from the shadows. Immediately the cheerful atmosphere shattered, and the group tensed. Leaning against a graffiti covered brick wall were six individuals; Harry recognized most of them as bouncers that worked nearby. Two of them were dressed in eighties costumes; one appearing as though he had stepped off a Duran Duran album cover, while the other man, in a white suit and a flamingo coloured shirt, was attempting to look like a member of the Miami Vice squad. Only attempting, as Dudley really didn't look his best in bright pink. Harry instinctively stepped back, looking to avoid a confrontation.

Mike, however, wasn't so accommodating. " What the fuck did you just say?"

The man who had spoken smirked and crossed his arms over his chest, staying tauntingly silent. Tim tugged on Mike's arm, and the group began moving uneasily away. For a moment it seemed that nothing more was going to come of the altercation, but then the last bouncer along the wall kicked hard at Mike's leg, making Mike trip and cry out. Nobody really knew how Tim managed to move so fast, but all of a sudden the perpetrator was against the wall, one of Tim's hand twisted harshly in the man's shirt, the other pressing against the man's throat. It took a considerable amount of aggravation to get a rise out of the steadfast Tim, but hurting Mike in anyway guaranteed swift retribution. Once his anger was roused, Tim was a fearsome force to reckon with. The man in Tim's grip seemed to realize this, and began to regret his choice in victim.

" Apologize," Tim spat out, rattling the man's head against the bricks.

The man's eyes flickered to his companions, and saw that they were coming to his aide. Emboldened, he sneered, " Why? He's on his knees. All ready for you."

Tim drew back his fist, and landed one solid punch before he was shoved away by two of the man's friends.

" What the fuck is your problem?" Ron yelled out, shoving back at the nearest of their adversaries. He reached down a hand and pulled Mike to his feet, dusting the smaller man off, all the while staring down anyone who so much as looked at him cross-eyed. " What could they have possibly done to you?"

" Walking into our clubs like you fucking own the place. Acting like there's nothing wrong with taking it up the arse. It's about time someone reminded you how sick and perverted you lot are. We don't want you coming around no more," said a different voice. The members of the little hate-gang were nodding along, and Harry clenched his jaw angrily when he saw Dudley joining in enthusiastically.

Surprisingly, Ron didn't seem to feel the need to impress on them that he was not a homosexual as well. It was a deliberate show of solidarity; despite any small issues Ron held about homosexuality, he was definitely on Harry's side when it came to matters such as this. Ron was not about to let these malcontents get away with prejudice directed at his friends.

" We'll go any place we like, and we'll be a lot more welcome then you bunch of shit-faced cowards," Ron said.

" Wait, I know you. You're that freak that… You're Harry's little freak friend," Dudley said, speaking up for the first time. Dudley stepped forward out of the gloom, and scrutinized the group with his beady little eyes. " Ha! It's my cousin Harry, the bloody poof. To think we picked you lot to hassle at random. Well, this does make things more interesting."

" Look, just leave us the hell alone, and nobody has to get hurt," Harry ground out. Dudley snickered along with the rest of his friends, clearly unfazed by the threat. Realistically speaking, they had every right to be cocky, as the majority of Dudley's group outweighed and out-muscled those of Harry's group, with only Tim and Ron being of equal size.

" Aww, Harry. Is that anyway to treat family?" Dudley said in a sickeningly sweet voice that made Harry's stomach start to churn.

" You're not my family," Harry replied coolly. Looking at Dudley, watching him bully and belittle his friends, Harry realized it was time he stopped backing down. He had finally had enough of his cousin. " To think I wasted so much time caring what you thought. You see these people? They matter; they deserve to be my family. Tell your pals to back off right now, because if they touch one of my friends, there will be nothing left of them, understand?"

" Oh, the poor little orphan thinks he has a family. A family full of freaks, and faggots. How

appropriate," Dudley mocked.

" Hey fat ass, remember me? I've been meaning to pay you back for the smack you gave me last time," Draco said, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Harry. Draco cracked his knuckles loudly, claiming, " I've been practicing for weeks."

" Think I'm scared of you, you sodding queer? I've flattened you once, I'll do it again."

" I've not been practicing my punching, asshole. Pretend like there's something in that misshapen lump on your shoulders, and try to think. You know what I am, you know what Harry is, and it may interest you to know that all six of us once attended the same school," Draco said menacingly. Draco smirked in satisfaction as Dudley's face paled. " Yes, that's right. *That* school."

" You can't… You're not allowed…"

" People will let a lot of things slide for Harry. I don't think anyone will particularly care what happens to you, disgusting scum-sucking slime that you are."

Dudley shifted his weight anxiously from foot to foot, looking at his friends, who were following the conversation with puzzled expressions on their faces. " Let's… Let's get out of here. We don't want to hang around this diseased bunch of shirt-lifters anyway."

" But we can take them easy," said the Duran Duran impostor. There was a chorus of agreement from Dudley's friends, and while they hesitated, Draco glanced behind him briefly, meeting Hermione's eyes in a short but meaningful gaze. Hermione replied with a curt nod, and inconspicuously retrieved her wand from the folds of her shirtsleeve. Turning back, Draco faced-off against Dudley again.

" Decided yet? Because this is the last chance you have to leave here in one piece. After this, if you so much as breathe the air in Harry's vicinity, I'll know about it, and make you wish you were dead. Got that? Stay the fuck away from him," Draco hissed.

" You son of a bitch," Dudley said, voice squealing with equal parts of both anger and fear. Dudley lunged, and Draco sidestepped. Rage made Dudley's face turn an ugly shade of red, and Dudley reached for Draco again. Before Dudley could connect, Draco's face began to contort.

Dudley stumbled backwards, eyes widening in terror. Draco's eyes turned from grey to red flame, glowing in the dim light. Gleaming, sharp, ivory fangs appeared at the corners of Draco's mouth; black, cruel looking claws appeared on his fingertips. Draco's once pallid skin turned faintly green in colour, and oily black wings seemed to sprout from his shoulders, unfurling with a rasping noise like rough reptile skin. Blood began trickling down his teeth, and Draco licked his lips as though relishing the taste.

There was no need to turn around, for Draco already knew that everyone else was similarly

displayed. Draco was going to have to congratulate Hermione on her excellent glamour; he had never seen six grown men back up so fast. Plus, Draco was willing to put money on Dudley having wet his pants at the sight of them.

" What the hell?" muttered one man, before the whole group turned and started running away, desperate to put as much distance between themselves and the bloodthirsty monsters as possible. Dudley was the last to leave, and Draco hissed one final time at him. Dudley tripped over a stray rubbish bin, and slammed against the pavement. Bruised and bloody, he didn't risk a backward glance as he trailed after his friends as fast as his bulk would allow. Harry didn't particularly care if he ever saw Dudley again.

Hermione released the glamour spell, and they all returned to looking like normal. Well, all except for Mike and Tim, who were understandably stunned.

" What just happened? Something did happen, right? I mean, I wasn't the only who saw… who saw us turn into those things?" Mike eventually said.

Harry sighed, " Tim, Mike, there's something I've been meaning to tell you…"

Knowing the explanations were going to be long and complicated (especially with Mike uttering 'cool' at every single opportunity), the group found a twenty-four hour restaurant, and sat down in a comfortable booth. They ordered some food, and some tea, not because they were particularly hungry, but more because it was a needed distraction when the conversation got too tense.

Hermione was required to use her wand no less then three times before Tim was convinced that their explanation of being witches and wizards was not some elaborate hoax. Even after she had turned the saltshaker into a shoelace, Tim remained slightly sceptical. Tim was a great believer in everything having a rational explanation, and a serious discussion of magic was a hard thing for him to grasp all at once. He remained relatively quiet, organizing his thoughts. Mike took to the idea of a hidden magical society much more rapidly, and made up for Tim's reticence by talking twice as much as usual (which for Mike was something of an accomplishment). While Mike asked his zillion questions, Harry took a moment to give a relieved sigh. Neither Mike nor Tim, despite their varied reactions, seemed intimidated about the news or offended that Harry had kept it secret from them.

Looking around the table, it occurred to Harry that he had been extremely fortunate in his choice of friends. Ron, who would always stand up for him; Hermione, who always gave her support, whatever his decisions; Tim, who remained steady through all his ups and downs; Mike, who would always accept him, no matter what; Draco, who loved him for who he was. Not used to such sentimentality, Harry hoped none of his friends questioned him about his suddenly sappy grin. He knew he would never hear the end of it from Draco if he were to start blubbering.

" What do you think, Harry?" Harry realized he had been dreaming away while the conversation around him had continued.

" Sorry, what?"

" We were wondering what houses Tim and Mike would have been in. Draco's convinced Mike would have been a Hufflepuff," Hermione explained.

" Hufflepuff. I like the sound of that. Hufflepuff, Hufflepuff…" Mike continued to say the name over and over again, and most of the group tuned him out.

" The way you say it, it sounds like I'm insulting Mike by putting him in Hufflepuff," Draco protested.

" Why, what's wrong with Hufflepuff? It's got such a cool name: it's got a huffle, then a puff," Mike said. Tim muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'out of the closet and then some'.

Draco rolled his eyes when the three former Gryffindor's shared a look; " There's nothing wrong with being in Hufflepuff house. These three, however, are Gryffindor's, which means they think their house is the only one worth anything."

" That's not true!" Ron refuted hotly.

" Yet it is," Draco replied sharply. In a slightly gentler tone, he continued, " We all feel that way about our own houses. It's the whole point – we're better behaved if we feel pride in our houses, and try to do well in them. Hufflepuffs, however, are the exception. That lovey-dovey bunch wants everyone to be friends, and competition is virtually unheard of. So long as you want to have fun, they'll welcome you. They rarely take themselves seriously, throw the loudest, craziest parties, have the most 'experimental' love lives, and consequently, Mike would have made an excellent Hufflepuff."

The silence that followed Draco's little spiel was all encompassing, until Mike started whingeing, " Oooh, it's not fair! I want to be a Hufflepuff!"

" Actually, so do I now. I forgot about their parties," Ron admitted. At this, the whole group started cracking up.

" The parties were really good then?" Hermione asked curiously. Harry and Ron nodded; Draco questioned:

" You never went to one?"

" Hermione usually chose to study," Harry supplied.

Mike made a face, exclaiming, " That's what Tim would have done. So I guess he would have been in your house, Harry."

" Tim a Gryffindor? Maybe. I was thinking Ravenclaw actually, because they're supposed to be the rational, deep thinkers of the school," Harry replied.

" You know, I never realized it before, but there really isn't much difference between the houses, is there?" Hermione said. " I mean, we could all have been in different houses, and we would have probably done just as well."

" Well, when I consider that my roommates were Dean, Seamus, Neville, and Harry, then I have to think it was completely random. Not much to link us all together in a group. In the end, we're all individuals, I suppose," Ron said.

" Plus, the ratio of students per house per year remains relatively constant. There's probably a lot of 'borderline' people, who go in whichever house has need of the most students," Hermione said intelligently.

" If you could have been in any other house, which would you have chosen?" Harry asked, curious.

" Ravenclaw," Hermione said immediately.

" Me too," Draco said.

After a moment to think, Ron answered with: " Hufflepuff."

Harry didn't want to answer, even though he had been the one to ask the question. His friends were all looking at him expectantly, however, so he eventually mumbled, " Slytherin. I mean, I almost was one. It was where the sorting hat wanted me, so I've always sort-of wondered…"

" Slytherin, really?" Ron asked, slightly horrified.

" Slytherin, really… " Draco repeated, a far more lecherous quality to his words. Harry tried not to gasp when Draco placed a warm hand on his thigh and squeezed. " A shared dorm room… That would have been interesting."

" Ooh, dorm rooms. And shared meals, sweaty sports teams… communal showers! Why wasn't I a wizard, damn it!" Mike pouted, rather disgruntled.

" But a Slytherin, Harry?" Ron wheedled. Draco scowled at the red head for interrupting his little 'Slytherin Harry' fantasy.

" Am I missing something?" Mike asked.

" Slytherin, Draco's former house, has a really bad reputation," Ron said, in what he thought was a diplomatic voice.

Draco took offence regardless, snorting disparagingly, " Oh yes, that makes a lot of sense. A brave house, Gryffindor; a smart house, Ravenclaw; a friendly house, Hufflepuff; and an evil house, Slytherin."

Mike missed the sarcastic tone in Draco's voice, and he scratched his head in confusion. " Why would there be an evil house?"

" Exactly my point. Claiming Slytherin is an evil house is stupid, why would Hogwart's have an evil house? We're supposed to be ambitious, that's all."

Ron didn't like being mocked, and he retorted, " What's your big ambition then? World's biggest prat?"

" Actually, up until a little while ago it was to get into the great Harry Potter's pants. Guess I need a new goal now," Draco said, enjoying the grimace that formed on Ron's face at the implication. Harry blushed, and became fascinated with the sugar packets in front of him.

Mike was anxious about the way Ron and Draco were glaring at each other (he had had enough of fighting for one night at least) so he interjected with what he hoped was a light-hearted comment. " So if I'm a Hufflepuff, and Tim's a Ravenclaw, how compatible are we?"

" Oh Ravenclaw's and Hufflepuff's work quite well together," Hermione said brightly.

" As do Gryffindor's with other Gryffindor's," Ron said, wrapping an arm around Hermione's waist, and pulling her closer. Harry and Draco looked at each other, before Harry said, very melodramatically: " Oh woe is me, why must my love be a Slytherin?"

Draco caught on almost immediately, stating in an irritatingly high-pitched voice, " Such a tragedy! Harry, I cannot be with you, my house forbids it!"

" Why must we suffer so?" Harry cried.

" Alright, alright! We get it, now stop the dramatics," Ron said, slightly exasperated. Harry and Draco snickered, but did quiet down.

" Well, Harry, this has been one of the weirdest nights of my life. And keep in mind who my boyfriend is," Tim said.

" Hey!" Mike said, affronted.

" I meant that in a good way. I won't ever forget tonight," Tim said sincerely.

" Just like I won't forget how Ron charged that mean, rough, fashion victim, and saved poor little me," Mike said, fluttering his eyelids like mad at Ron, and chortling merrily at Ron's flush of

embarrassment. " Though, it doesn't really compare to the deeds done by my wonderful boyfriend." Mike crawled into Tim's lap, wrapping his arms around Tim's neck.

" Why do I get the feeling your sucking-up for a reason?" Tim asked.

" Can you carry me home, please? When that idiot tripped me, I think I hurt my ankle," Mike said imploringly. Tim sighed heavily, before agreeing to carry Mike piggyback style at least as far as the underground.

" We'll be off then," Tim said, once Mike was settled on his back. " Congratulations again on your wedding, Ron and Hermione. Thanks for dinner, Draco, and Harry I'll see on Monday before class, yeah?"

" For sure," Harry agreed amicably. Tim nodded, and then walked out of the restaurant, with Mike cheerfully waving goodbye until they were out of sight. The door to the restaurant had only just swung shut, when Mike came hurtling back into the restaurant, his ankle mysteriously fine. He slid to a stop at their table and slapped a large sloppy kiss on Ron's cheek.

" Thanks again, hero," Mike said, before he ran back out of the restaurant.

Ron looked as though he had been hit with a stupefy spell. For several moments there was no response from him, and then, when he spoke, it was mostly gibberish: " But I… He… did he? Kiss… Hero me?"

" Mike's right, you are a hero. I was so proud of you, standing up against injustice the way you did. You really came through for Mike, for Harry, for all of us," Hermione said glowingly. " It's times like this that I remember why I love you so much."

Ron, who was busily wiping at his face with a paper napkin, paused and turned to his praising fiancée.

" Really?"

" Yes, really," Hermione said gently. Ron leaned towards her, and Hermione tilted her head slightly to the side as their eyes drifted to a close. A loud, and sarcastic 'Aww' from Draco and Harry interrupted the kiss.

Ron turned to glare at them, " Do you two mind?"

" No, we don't mind. But if you both get to do that, then so do we," Harry said. Harry turned simpering eyes on Draco: " And you were so brave, darling."

" So were you, sweetheart," Draco gushed.

" Bloody hell, do we really sound like that?" Ron asked, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

" I had no idea it was so disturbing," Hermione added.

Mission accomplished, Draco and Harry gratefully dispensed with the horrible nicknames.

Eventually, the four of them left the restaurant, and made their way back to Harry's flat.

" Hey, I just had a thought," Harry said.

" Well, there's a first time for everything," Ron and Draco intoned at the same time. They were both slightly disgusted at having come up with the same quip, and fell quiet.

Harry, more then accustomed to their gibes, ignored them entirely; " How are we going to work the sleeping arrangements?"

" I'll transfigure the sofa," Hermione said with a yawn.

" Oh, it's just… We're a little nervous about using magic. Because of Draco's father and all," Harry said.

" I'm authorized to use magic, so there's no reason why it would be traced, unless someone was looking for it specifically, which I very much doubt Lucius will do. A mudblood like me helping out Draco Malfoy? How likely is that? Don't worry about the glamour that I did earlier, either. Nobody will believe a bunch of drunks even if they do try to describe their ordeal."

" Dudley will probably do me an unintentional favour and try to hush everything up anyway," Harry replied.

" So that was your cousin? He's dreadful, Harry," Hermione said sympathetically.

Feeling peculiarly peaceful, Harry replied truthfully, " Doesn't matter anymore."

At the flat, Hermione turned Harry's red sofa into a simple double bed, and all but fell into it. She wasn't accustomed to their 'adventures' anymore, and coupled with the very late hour, she was more tired then she had been in a very long time. It was an effort just to get undressed and into her nightgown. Ron ducked his head under the tap in the bathroom, washing out the hairspray until he could finally push his hair back into its usual position. It was a relief not to have his view obstructed anymore. On the way out of the bathroom, he ran into Draco, who was obviously going to try and remove the gel from his own blond locks. They sized each other up, glared, and then moved out of each other's way.

Ron grumbled as he got into bed next to Hermione.

" What was that?" Hermione mumbled drowsily.

" That stupid git Malfoy," Ron replied. Hermione gave a tired sigh.

" What did he do now?"
" Nothing. It's what he's going to do that's bothering me. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what they're going to do in there."

" In where?" Hermione asked. Her brain was far too sleep-clogged at the moment to handle Ron's faulty logic.

" The bedroom, of course. You just know Draco's itching to get his hands all over Harry. Just so he can rub it in that he's the one getting into Harry's pants."

" So, you want to get into Harry's pants instead?" Hermione asked innocently, a smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

" No! Are you paying attention at all? Draco's going to sleep with our best friend just to prove that he's this sexy, irresistible, lover that we can never hope to compare to," Ron said. Hermione would have been tempted to laugh if she weren't aware that Ron was being more or less serious.
" We have to have sex."

Hermione spluttered, " Oh, that's romantic."

" It's not because I want to, but because we have to. We can't let Draco think he's better then us. Come on, we can out-compete them," Ron said earnestly.

" I sincerely hope you're too intoxicated right now to know what it is you're saying, because that was quite possibly the stupidest thing you have ever said. Goodnight," Hermione said, rolling onto her side and giving Ron her back.

Ron lay staring at the ceiling for a while, his ears straining to hear for any minute sounds coming from Harry's bedroom.

" So… How about it, 'Mione?"

" Shut-up before I hex you Ron Weasley," Hermione said.

" So that's a definite no?"

Hermione groaned and pulled her pillow tightly over her head.

In Harry's bedroom, Draco's eyes suddenly shot open.

" There, did you hear that? Now do you believe me?"

Harry was very nearly asleep and consequently was not very receptive to his boyfriend's

ramblings.

" Huh?"

" Hermione just groaned. I told you, they're shagging like rabbits out there, and here we are just sleeping."

" Yes. Sleeping. What a strange thing to want to do in the middle of the night after an exhausting day," said Harry sarcastically.

" Oh come on, we can sleep anytime," Draco whined.

" Then how about now?"

" Right now we need to be keeping up with them. We can't have them believing they're a hotter couple. Think of it as promoting equal rights as a gay couple. Hell, I'll even do all the work and you can just lie there, if you want," Draco suggested.

" What I want is for you to stop being so ridiculous, and frankly sickening, and for me to get some sleep. They're not shagging, and thanks, by the way, for the mental image of my two best friends getting off together on my couch, but even if they were, we certainly don't need to have sex just because they are."

" But they're winning, Harry!" Draco said, visibly distressed.

" Goodnight," Harry said, settling down as far away from Draco as he could, and ignoring Draco's protests.

" Fine. Be that way," Draco said, crossing his arms across his chest and turning onto his side. " But if in the morning it turns out I was right, and Ron starts gloating, then I'm telling him I fucked your brains out, and you'd better corroborate my story."

Harry groaned and pulled his pillow tightly over his head.

In the other room, Ron's eyes opened as he fretted over the cause of Harry's audible groan.

It was close to five in the morning when Ron was once again awoken by sound coming from Harry's bedroom. Ron was usually a heavy sleeper, but he had spent many of his formative years in a bed across from Harry's, and one of Harry's nightmares was always able to rouse him from slumber. Apparently those instincts were still intact for Ron discerned that Harry was indeed having a nightmare. He slipped silently from the bed, careful not to wake Hermione, and began edging towards the bedroom, just in case Harry needed something. At the last moment, Ron remembered that Draco was also inside the bedroom, and he thought that walking in on them was probably not a good idea. Ron knew that if he ever saw Draco Malfoy naked that there wouldn't be enough power in the world to enervate him back into consciousness.

Ron was standing in the shadows of the hallway, deliberating over a course of action, when the bedroom door opened, and Draco walked out. Ron was happy to note that the other man was completely covered in a pair of navy blue pyjamas. Draco walked confidently to the bathroom, despite the gloom, and returned with a glass of water. Draco left the bedroom door ajar, and Ron crept closer, simply to reassure himself that Harry was okay.

Ron watched as Draco held out the glass of water for Harry, who took two or three grateful gulps, before indicating he was satisfied. Draco placed the cup on the bedside table, and slid into the bed next to Harry. Ron knew from his own past experiences that Harry was invariably grumpy after waking from a nightmare, and didn't take kindly to sympathy, no matter how sincerely it was expressed.

As predicted, Harry muttered in a sulky voice, " You don't have to go making a fuss. I'm fine, it was just a stupid dream."

" Yeah, but the way you were thrashing about was very distracting. I couldn't sleep with that going on. It's in my best interest to get you calm," Draco said.

Ron's jaw clenched. *The selfish git*! Draco was supposed to try and comfort Harry, not dismiss the nightmares as an inconvenience. Surprisingly though, he noticed that Harry now seemed less anxious. Maybe that was the best way to deal with Harry: couch caring in an air of indifference so that Harry couldn't refuse it so easily. Harry was still looking at the wall, some traces of a lingering fear in his unfocussed eyes. Draco curled up behind Harry, and put an arm across Harry's chest to hold him tightly. Ron expected the gesture to be rebuffed – he had never known anyone at Hogwart's to be able to touch Harry without him being uncomfortable. Harry instead tucked Draco's arm more securely against him, as though Draco were a blanket instead of a person.

" Comfy? Can I go to sleep now?" Draco asked. The tone was arrogant and snotty, but this time Ron let himself hear the undertone of concern in Draco's voice. Harry mumbled something soft as the last of the fear fled from his face.

Ron continued to watch for a few minutes, his mind whirling as Draco and Harry fell into a deep sleep, entwined around one another. Denial couldn't help him now. There was definitely something strong between Harry and Draco, and for the first time, Ron felt like Draco deserved it. Draco could do something nobody else, not even Ron himself, could do. Draco could understand what Harry needed. The way Draco had taken care of Harry just now, and the way Harry had accepted that touch, needed that touch… It was enough for Ron. He would probably never get along with Draco, but he felt he could respect him and his feelings towards Harry.

Ron clambered into bed next to Hermione, unable to resist placing a kiss on his future wife's temple.

" Hmm?" Hermione mumbled, still mostly asleep.

" Harry has my blessing," Ron said, before pulling Hermione into his arms, and cradling her until he fell asleep.

It was quite late the following morning when Harry first stirred. Blinking owlishly, he rubbed at his eyes before reaching for his glasses.

" What time is it?" Harry asked Draco, who was lying on his stomach beside him.

" Nearly noon. I was going to go out and make breakfast, but I didn't want to risk running into Ron. I somehow don't figure him for a morning person."

Harry turned onto his stomach as well, and levered himself onto his elbows so he could peer over Draco's shoulder. Draco had a book propped on a pillow in front of him, and he was flipping idly through the pages.

" What are you reading?"

" The book Mike gave us," Draco said nonchalantly.

" Oh," Harry said, yawning. He then shut his mouth so quickly that he bit his tongue. " Wait, did you just say you were reading…"

" Well, I wouldn't say reading so much as looking at the pictures," Draco said, cheekily. Feeling a flush creeping over his body, Harry couldn't help but be curious.

" And?"

Draco pushed the book over so that it was between them, and they could both view the contents. Harry was confronted with a black and white drawing that… well honestly it confused him

" Is that a leg? And if so, how is it possible to bend it that way?" Harry asked.

Draco chuckled, " I was just thinking the same thing. Wait, this one's even better."

Draco flicked a few pages ahead, and jabbed his finger at another illustration. Harry tilted his head one-way, and then another, trying to make sense out of what he was seeing.

" Okay, that one's just… I mean, there's two people and like seven arms," Harry said. Draco nodded, glad that Harry was in agreement about the implausibility of some of the pictures.

Draco found another picture and started laughing, " I don't know about you, but the only way I could do that position is if my limbs were no longer attached to my body."

" Judging by the expression on the poor bloke's face, it seems that is precisely how you do it.

Funny, I missed the helpful hint regarding dismemberment."

They spent quite a long time poking fun and laughing at some of the 'advanced' positions that were located in the last few chapters of the book. As they began flipping towards the beginning of the book in search of more titillating and ridiculous drawings however, the mood began to shift. Harry's arm, which had been lying across Draco's shoulder blades, tensed. Draco's foot had been running gently up the back of Harry's calf, just under the edge of Harry's pyjamas, but now it paused, as though Draco was suddenly aware of what he was doing. They began glancing covertly at each other, trying to gage reactions.

Draco paused in his page flipping when he came to the start of a chapter entitled: 'Basics for Beginners'. They had both gone very still, barely even daring to breathe.

" This would actually be useful," said Harry eventually, absolutely certain he was blushing a dark shade of red. " I mean, if we ever want to… If you wanted to… If we both wanted to try…"

Draco, who was also turning an attractive shade of pink, reached down to the side of the bed, and retrieved the gift bag that had held the book.

" There's um… Actually some more stuff in the bag," Draco said.

Harry took the bag and upended it onto the bed. A rather large, heavy bottle of lubricating oil, and a pair of fuzzy pink handcuffs tumbled out in front of them. Harry stared at the items in utter disbelief for a moment, before the situation suddenly became too much, and Harry burst out laughing. A relieved Draco joined in, and once the outburst was over, they both felt a lot more relaxed. Harry gave Draco a half hug, and Draco resumed stroking Harry's calf with his toes.

" I would like to try it, at some point," Harry admitted softly.

" So would I," Draco said.

" How do we decide… Who does who?" Harry asked.

Draco smiled, " From what I've read so far, the book seems to discourage the idea that one person has to be exclusively top, and the other exclusively bottom. It should be whatever feels most natural at the time. My interpretation of that is that we choose according to the situation and what we feel we need."

" Good, because I would like to do both. I mean that I want to…" Harry trailed off, not having enough experience to explain the things he was feeling.

" I want to touch you and be touched by you," Draco said softly.

" Yeah, that's what I want too," Harry said breathily. Harry leaned in and brushed his mouth against Draco's. The kiss was slow and sweet, and left them both with dopey smiles and dazed

expressions. " I'm glad we can talk about some of this intimate stuff. I hate to think what it would have been like if I'd not met you. It's kind-of embarrassing still, but I know I can trust you."

" I understand what you mean. And now we know we're prepared to take the next step," Draco said. Seeing Harry's eyes widen nervously, he explained, " Not right away, but when the time is right, we'll know it's okay to move forward."

The newly shared confidences made them feel closer somehow. Draco ran his fingers through Harry's hair, and they kissed a second time, just as gently as before.

The pages had turned of their own accord, and the book was now open to the very first chapter, entitled: ' Happy and Gay? How to Get in the Mood!' It was too much to resist, and they quickly read through the typed words, competing to see who could read each page the fastest. A bulleted list soon had them laughing again.

" Role playing? If I ask nicely, will you be my slave boy, Harry? It wouldn't be too much of a change for you, after all."

Harry stuck his tongue out at Draco, and continued to scan the list. " Hey, it says to 'talk dirty' – too bad they didn't put down any suggestions."

" What? Can't come up with any of your own?" Draco cackled gleefully.

" Like what? Ooh, baby, you make me so hot," Harry said. Draco actually did think it was sort-of sexy the way Harry's voice lilted over the unlikely phrase, but he laughed disparagingly anyway.

" I get hard just thinking about you. Take me, lover," Draco said fervently, the quirk in his eyebrows the only thing giving him away.

" I'll make you come so hard you'll forget your name. You can scream mine instead," Harry said, grasping at the first dirty thing he could think of to say – he'd heard it in a movie once. It seemed a little stupid to be competing over who could say the lamest comments, but silly or not, Harry enjoyed a challenge.

" I'm going to lick you like a lolly until you pop," Draco returned quickly, wetting his lips. Harry knew it was a deliberate ploy meant to make him lose his composure. Harry closed his eyes because it was working.

" I'm really good with a wand… want me to prove it?"

" Nothing like a broomstick between your legs, and mine's top of the line, want a test drive?"

There was a long pause, broken only by their respective snickering, as they scrambled for new ideas.

" Uh… You're a stallion and I just want to ride you until you drop," Harry said; part of him was amazed he could even come up with something so asinine.

" I want your um… God-like column of marbled flesh to pound me to heaven and back," Draco muttered, equally stuck for ideas. He looked at Harry and they both burst out laughing. " Sorry, somehow we went from 'dirty' talk, to cheesy romance novels."

Harry snorted, " God-like column - I've heard it called a lot of things, but that's just wrong."

" Yeah, well, calling me a stallion is nothing to be proud of either," Draco retorted, still laughing.

" Well, now I'm wondering just how familiar you are with the romance novel," Harry teased.

" It was only once when my mother…" Draco blushed, " I mean, I don't read such tripe."

Harry laughed so hard he fell off the bed with a thump. Draco peered over the edge to see if he was okay, and couldn't help giggling at the confused look on Harry's face. Harry grabbed Draco's shoulders and pulled him to the floor as well. Draco decided the only fit punishment for such manhandling was to tickle Harry.

" Hey Harry, I just thought of another one. Want a massage from the inside?"

" Oh, charming," said Harry sarcastically.

They were laughing so hard, partly from the crude jokes, partly from the tickle war, that they didn't hear the soft knock on their bedroom door.

" Harry? You okay?"

Draco rolled off Harry, and let him go reassure his friend. Harry opened the bedroom door part-ways.

" Sorry, did we wake you?"

" We just heard a couple of loud thunks and we were worried," Ron said. For some reason, this made Harry and Draco start tittering again. Ron looked from Harry to Draco and back again, wondering if he'd ever seen either of them so happy or so dishevelled. " What's so funny?"

" Oh, err," Harry tried to think of something he could say, without having to tell Ron about Mike's book and what they'd ended up talking about. " It's nothing much. Just an inside joke."

" Inside!" Draco nearly shouted, before starting a new hysterical laughing fit. Harry realized his unintentional pun, and even though he was seriously in need of some oxygen, he was soon a part of the hilarity again.

Ron watched impassively as Harry and Draco rolled on the floor, clutching their sides, and howling with laughter. Lifting an eyebrow, he said quite calmly, though loud enough for them both to hear him,

" I've decided you two deserve each other."

" Thanks Ron," Harry wheezed out. Draco just nodded that he had heard. They still hadn't stopped sniggering, however.

" After all, clearly you're both stark raving mad."

Ron tried not to wince as the laughter redoubled.

The 31st of March is my birthday, and I really worked hard to get this in by then. I just made it! Nice reviews would certainly help me stop pouting that I'm getting old… That, a job, and a boyfriend are all I really want for birthday… At least the reviews are possible (tee hee).

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Chapter: 13

I've often wondered if a chapter is especially late, what the reaction is? Grateful it's finally out, or so pissed off that you can barely stand to read it? Anyway, sorry for the wait - I have excuses galore, but nobody wants to hear them I'm sure. The reviews were fantastic; I may very well have given up if not for the constant barrage of support. And now you're thinking: just give us the story already, damn it! Okay then. Enjoy!

Harry and Hermione were arguing. They were aware that the other two occupants of the flat were nearby, and so out of consideration they kept their voices lowered, and their gesticulations at a bare minimum. It would have been better had they yelled; the abnormal quiet was far more disturbing.

Draco wasn't certain how the argument had started; the leading up conversation had been relatively innocent and innocuous. Sunday had been ridiculously lazy, with everyone still recovering from being out late Saturday night, and today had started off in the same easy-going vein, which made the fight rather unexpected. They had just finished eating dinner, and Hermione had asked Harry if he and Draco were going to take correspondence training and become fully operational wizards. Somehow, this had evolved into a discussion of life goals, and finally into heated words about certain people minding their own business. That was when Hermione and Harry had abandoned the kitchen for the front room, leaving Draco and Ron sitting silent and anxious at the kitchen table.

Unwilling witnesses to the argument, Ron and Draco adopted a policy of complete stillness, willing themselves to become invisible and thus avoid the embarrassment of the situation. Both made a conscious effort to ignore the sounds drifting from the other room, but sometimes the odd sentence would reach them regardless.

"… You haven't seen what I have. You're at school all the time…"

" … You're here two days and suddenly you're an expert…"

Draco shifted slightly in his chair, uncomfortably aware that they were discussing him. Ron assiduously avoided making eye contact.

"… You're not doing him any favours letting him hideout here…"

" … Not hiding. When will you accept that I chose this because it's what I want?"

" And did he choose? Or did fear decide for him? Open your eyes…"

Draco got to his feet and opened the refrigerator door, causing a slight rattle. He pulled out two chilled beers, and knocked the bottle-caps off against the counter top. Wordlessly, he handed one beer to Ron, who gave a brief nod of thanks, and then they proceeded to drink.

" … Deserve so much more…"

" … Have all I need…"

The silence that followed this latest explosion of half-heard comments was deafening. Ron and Draco knew better then to think it was over, and they waited for the eye of the storm to pass.

" … You don't know everything!"

" … You're fault…"

" … Not fair!"

" … Selfish and…"

Ron stood up this time, and retrieved another couple of beers. They hadn't spoken once to each other, and yet an understanding of sorts had been established. It was a relief not to have to explain.

" ENOUGH!"

" FINE!"

Draco and Ron both winced at the force of the exclamations.

Ron's voice sounded eerie in the sudden quiet, " It's nearly over now. They'll sit and stew for a bit, then they'll start apologizing like there's no tomorrow."

Draco glanced over at the red head, appraising the other man with a calculating regard.

" This is familiar territory then?"

" Oh yes. Me, I like to kick up a fuss at the first sign of trouble, but these two… they ignore everything as long as possible, and then it all comes out, all at once. All these things they didn't even know they were feeling. I don't think they're even yelling at each other, more like they're just… I don't know."

" Saying it aloud, to see if it makes sense," Draco supplied.

" Yeah, that's it. Like they're carrying on two separate conversations, and they just happen to be in the same place," Ron said. He quickly downed the rest of his bottle of beer, and placed it on the table. Draco could detect soft murmurings from the front room again. Ron gave him a brief nod, letting Draco know he had heard the sounds too. " It's safe to go in now."

Ron stood up, and walked into the living room, but Draco still felt a little unnerved. There were few feelings more upsetting then hearing two people discuss your situation in your own home. Draco collected the rest of the plates from the table, and began the therapeutic task of dish washing. Swish, splash, clink, then onto the next utensil, mindless repetition that unfortunately left his brain unoccupied and free to worry. Would Harry talk with him about the argument if he were to ask? Did he even want to ask? Was he once again making too big a deal out of something?

The dishes were done, and the counter tops and table wiped clean. Draco packed away the few leftovers, and then decided to make coffee since they had never gotten to the dessert portion of the meal. The atmosphere in the main room was thankfully cozy and inviting once more. Harry gratefully took his mug of coffee, and settled back onto the couch. After Draco had done the necessary host duties, he sat down next to Harry and patted him on the leg.

" You alright?"

" Fine," Harry said. Draco snorted disbelievingly. Sure, Harry was *trying* to look comfortable and at ease, but Draco wasn't fooled.

" You really need to improve on your deception skills. It's making me look bad by association," Draco huffed. Draco then wiggled and prodded his way onto Harry's lap, no doubt blocking Harry's view of the telly, but uncaring either way. Harry slipped his arms around Draco's waist, and pulled him in tight. It was only when this connection was established, that either of them truly relaxed.

The four of them watched a movie that was on television, and then a documentary special on 'Museums of Europe' that Hermione wanted to see. Ron fell asleep halfway in, sprawled out on the carpet. Draco was relatively interested in the program, but cozied up as he was to Harry's warmth, he was tempted to fall asleep as well. Draco lasted until the closing credits, before yawning widely and settling himself more securely against Harry.

" Oh no you don't. Up you get lazy-bones, there's no way I'm carrying you to the bedroom," Harry said, poking Draco just under the ribs.

Draco whined, " Why not? And I'm not a lazy-bones. I went to work today, remember? I'm a productive member of society now."

" Well, excuse me. I take it back; you're not lazy at all. In which case you can certainly get yourself off the couch, and to bed."

" Damn. I foiled my own plan that time," Draco said. " How embarrassing. Anyway, 'night Hermione." He stood up and stretched, and headed for the bedroom, stepping over the prone Ron in the process. " 'Night Weasel," he muttered, low enough so that nobody else could hear.

Ron rolled over and peered up at him through mostly-closed eyes. A grin appeared on his sleep-swollen face, " Goodnight Ferret."

Draco rolled his eyes to prevent a smile from forming on his face – it was nice that some things could be depended upon. Harry said his goodnight's as well, promising Hermione for the millionth time that the alarm clock was indeed primed and ready to ring at the un-Godly hour of six, and followed Draco into the bedroom.

" Harry?" Draco queried, after they had been lying quietly for nearly an hour, neither of them sleeping.

" Yeah?"

" What did you and Hermione argue about?"

Harry sighed, and rolled over until he was facing Draco. Draco was on his side, an elbow propping his head up.

" I'm surprised you couldn't hear it for yourself."

" Just bits and pieces. Enough to gather that it was about me?"

" Sort-of. I think it has more to do with the fact that Hermione has never much liked the idea of me escaping to the Muggle world. She thinks I should go back and 'make a difference'," Harry said, snorting contemptuously.

" And she thinks I should do the same, is that it?"

" I'm not sure, really. She went down to the bookstore while you were working, right?"

" Personally, I think she came for the books, and I just happened to be there," Draco said. " But yeah, she came down for a bit. It was really busy though, so I couldn't talk much."

Harry suddenly felt very guilty for not asking Draco about his first day at work. It was an important event, and he had let it go by unnoticed. He hurried to rectify the mistake, asking: " How did it go?"

" It was nerve racking, stressful, and it made me feel like a moron…" Draco trailed off, and then grinned. " But it got better. The first hour was horrible, but then I found a routine, and I got more proficient at handling the money. Mrs. Cooper says I sold more in one day than she does in three."

Harry recognized the glitter of excitement in Draco's eyes, and smiled indulgently.

" Let me guess, all middle-aged housewives just itching to meet you face to face?"

" Hey, it's not like I can help how attractive I am. I don't even exercise," Draco teased. " I figure if you've got it, might as well use it."

Harry smiled, but the humour didn't reach his eyes this time. What Draco had just said echoed something Hermione had said earlier during their little spat, and it resonated uncomfortably in Harry's mind.

" Is this enough for you Draco?"

Draco's happy exterior merged into one of concern. " What do you mean?"

" You have a lot of skills – and I don't just mean attracting female spinsters at bookshops. Don't you want something… more?"

" What, I'm not good enough?" Draco said sharply. " Think it's pathetic how happy I am with a little catering job, is that it?"

" No!" Harry said loudly. A little too loudly, and he glanced guiltily at the door, hoping he hadn't disturbed anyone. In a lower voice, he repeated, " No. I'm very proud of what you've done. In fact, I think it's quite amazing what you've managed to accomplish. A month ago, there was no way you would have even considered taking a job outside the house. Now, not only have you accepted the job, but also you do it so well. I… I think… I know how lucky I am to have someone like you in my life."

Draco snuggled in closer to Harry, and put his head in the crook of Harry's shoulder. " Then why… Why ask if I want more?"

" Hermione said that while it's my choice to 'ruin all my chances, and squander my talents elsewhere', that it is not the same thing if I make you do the same. She said that I'm holding you back, and that I ought to be pushing you more."

" And what do you think?"

" I think that I don't want to ever let you go," Harry said sadly.

" There. You have your answer. You want me to stay, I don't want to go, and nobody else should have any opinion whatsoever."

Harry wanted to believe that it was all that simple, but he couldn't shake the feeling that Hermione was right. If he truly loved Draco, then shouldn't he do what was best for Draco, even if it meant hurting himself? He was afraid of losing Draco, and that's why he wanted to make-believe everything was fine. The guilt of such a selfish action was slowly spreading through his mind like a lengthening shadow.

Draco shifted still closer to Harry's body, placing an arm across his chest. Harry staunchly pushed the guilt and the doubt out of his thoughts, aware as he did so that the suppression was getting more difficult every time he was forced to do it. Harry ran fingers through Draco's soft hair, and revelled in just being close.

Draco spoke up, " Besides, what does Hermione know? Your life, which she's so disparaging of… I see nothing but good in it, and nothing but good can come of it. I see you growing, I see you making goals, I see you happy… I know we kind-of joked about it, but that night when you faced down Dudley? I realized you had changed, even in the relatively small amount of time I'd been with you. You stood up for yourself, for your beliefs, where before you had so many doubts… I was so proud of you."

" When Dudley said 'family', all I could remember was how you told me that love decides a family, not genetics. Dudley seemed so unimportant suddenly; all that mattered was you and my friends, my true family."

" You're exceptional, Harry. The 'great Harry Potter' has nothing on you," Draco said sincerely. Harry stared down at Draco, having waited his whole life to hear words of that sort. It felt even better then imagined.

" You're not so bad yourself," Harry choked out.

" No so bad? Ingrate," Draco said, mock-offended.

" Fine, you're exceptional too," Harry said, happy to fall back into their usual roles of teasing.

" Bah. Now you're just repeating what I said, to far poorer effect I might add."

" How about, I think you're stunningly gorgeous?" Harry suggested.

" Blatantly obvious, but go on. You're improving slightly," Draco said, inwardly glowing at the praise being heaped on his head.

" You have a frightening need for perfection, you're funny in a cynical and sardonic kind-of way, and you're terribly clever," Harry said.

" True, true. What else?"

" You're sweet, caring, and patient with me. You're adorably protective."

" You like that then?"

" Oh yeah," Harry said, and he wrapped his arms around Draco and rolled them so that he rested on top. Draco looked awfully tempting with his hair slightly curled and bedraggled, and his face flushed from the compliments; Harry had to remind himself quite forcefully that his friends were only a thin wall and a few steps away. Despite this, he leaned in and kissed Draco soundly. " You're also sexy as hell."

It seemed Draco was also thinking about the couple sleeping in the living room, as he disentangled himself reluctantly from Harry. " When are they leaving again?"

" Tomorrow morning," Harry said. They both grinned, looking at the digital clock. Feeling just a little bit naughty, Harry reached over, and set the alarm time back from six to five. What was an hour between friends anyway?

The next morning, despite the very early hour, spirits were high.

" Now that we're back at the Burrow, I'll expect a lot more communication from you, got that Harry?"

" Yes Hermione. I'll write, I swear."

" See that you do. It was wonderful seeing you again, Harry," Hermione said. She gave Harry a hug, and a smile. " We really do miss you, you know."

" Thanks, 'Mione, and you can come for a visit anytime, remember. Even though I suppose that means Ron will have to come as well…"

" Hey! I resent that. I'm a great visitor. Tons of fun, a riot of laughs," Ron refuted. Harry reached up and ruffled his hair.

" Whatever you say," Harry said. Ron shoved him playfully, before picking up their bags.

" See you around Harry, and you too Malfoy. Oh, and thanks for feeding us. I don't suppose you could teach 'Mione?"

Hermione slapped Ron upside the head.

" What? Those waffles were incredible. Even better then my mum's," Ron said. He then paled considerably, and his eyes widened. " None of you can ever tell anyone that I said that."

They laughed at Ron's horror-struck face, and then the final last good-byes were said, there was a last hug from Hermione for both Draco and Harry, and then Harry was closing the door behind them.

" Well, all in all, I'd say that visit went fairly well," Draco said. He headed into the kitchen and put the sticky dishes in the sink. He stole a bright red strawberry from the bowl, and popped it into his mouth, nearly groaning as the impossibly sweet juice burst over his tongue.

" Yeah, it was. Though, I'm still not that sorry to see them go," Harry said, taking a strawberry for himself, and biting into it carefully. A dark berry stained tongue swirled over his lips to catch any missed drops of juice.

" Still, just because they're gone, that's no reason for us to… It's only been a few days. We're not that desperate," Draco said softly. He grabbed a small but perfectly shaped strawberry, dipped it in the last of the cream, held it up to his mouth, and slowly licked the thick clotted cream off the ripe berry.

Harry's hands shook as he reached for the last strawberry in the bowl. It was dripping with sugary juice, and by the time it reached his mouth, his fingers were coated in the light syrup.

" Then again, we were interrupted when they came. So it's not so much desperation as it is completing unfinished business."

Harry sucked the sticky red liquid from each of his fingers, laying his tongue flat against his palm to remove every last trace of sweetness.

A tad breathlessly, Draco said, " You have me convinced."

In an instant, they were pressed tightly together, their mouths melded and their tongues tasting the lingering flavour of strawberries.

" You are such a tease," Harry muttered, sliding his lips along Draco's jaw, and then dipping down to the soft curve of his neck.

" Me? Please, who was the one sucking his fingers in imitation of some faded porn star?"

" You were the one who had to start on the whole strawberry thing in the first place. Moaning and groaning as though in orgasm at just the taste – like I ever stood a chance."

Draco laughed, and recaptured Harry's lips in a passionate kiss. They were hungry for each other. They pulled at clothes and touched skin with a fervour that made their actions rough, yet neither protested the treatment. They relished in it. The sheer want, the all-consuming need; the unbelievable feeling that came with being so very much desired.

Harry pushed Draco up against the wall, or at least he tried to, but the angle was slightly off, and they slid to the floor. Harry shrugged; the floor was better anyway. Draco's able fingers divested Harry of his t-shirt and were reaching for the loose pyjama bottoms.

" Bed?" Draco breathed out.

Harry lifted his head slightly and eyed the door to the bedroom, approximately seven steps from where they lay. Harry shook his head.

" Too far."

Harry grabbed Draco's hips with a grip that could possibly leave bruises, and pressed their lower bodies flush. Twin moans rang out, and Draco scrabbled frantically at the rest of the clothes that separated them. Sleeping attire was finally removed and tossed somewhere; hands glided over the newly revealed heated flesh.

" Be with me?" Harry asked suddenly, lifting his head from where it had been suckling on Draco's nipple, and searching Draco's passion-bright eyes.

" Thought I was," Draco replied, and tried to bring Harry's head back into kissing range.

" No, I mean really, be with me? In… In me?" Harry stammered, his flushed face becoming still more heated.

" Are you sure?" Draco tenderly brushed back a strand of ebony hair from Harry's face, looking for his answer in dark emerald pools.

" I want you to," Harry said decisively.

" Then we really should be in the bedroom," Draco said, smiling gently. Harry got to his feet, and helped Draco up. They hurried hand-in-hand to the bedroom, where Draco drew back the blankets on the bed before sitting down on it, pulling Harry alongside him.

They kissed long and slow, taking the edge of the nervousness they both felt. Harry let himself be pushed back onto the mattress, and Draco leaned over him, not once breaking the kiss.

" You remember the position the book said?" Draco asked. His voice was shaking slightly; now that the moment had arrived, he was more then a little afraid of causing Harry pain.

Harry did remember, and Draco's memory was equally solid. The bottle of lubricating oil was retrieved from the bedside table and placed within reach. Small touches of assurance and caring were exchanged at every opportunity.

" Tell me if I hurt you," Draco said finally, his words just barely loud enough to be heard.

" I trust you," Harry said.

" Right, no pressure then," Draco muttered. Harry laughed thinly, and then reached for Draco's hand, squeezing it tightly.

They needn't have worried so much. There was some discomfort, but not much, and the pleasure swamped most other thoughts from their minds. The enjoyment increased exponentially when they accepted that the other was not going to break. And it became somehow more then just a physical reaction. It was trust, and want, and love, and faith; it was the final connection they needed to feel completely bonded in body, mind, and soul.

Harry let out a small hum of contentment.

" Tell me again why we waited so long?" Harry asked, turning gingerly onto his back. The first thing he saw was Draco's shining eyes. No, they were glowing eyes. And he did not mean that figuratively.

" Uh, Draco? Why are your eyes glowing like that?" Harry asked fearfully.

" This is really brilliant! How long do you think it will last?" Draco asked. Draco was almost giddy, and not at all bothered by the unusual phenomenon.

" I'm being serious. You're eyes look like a couple of silver Christmas fairy lights!"

" Really? Well, yours look like that swamp-monster's from the movie last night, all green and glowy in the dark," Draco retorted glibly.

" My eyes are glowing too?" Harry asked. Draco smiled and nodded happily. " Am I missing something? I mean eyes don't usually glow in real life. Only in comic books, and even then, radiation is usually involved."

Draco started to snigger.

" What's so funny?"

" Oh, just that I know something that apparently you don't know," Draco said smugly.

Harry was beginning to get exasperated, and gave Draco a glare, made all the more effective since his eyes were glowing freakily.

" Oh, relax, Potter. It's actually a good sign," Draco said. " I forget sometimes that you grew up amongst muggles. I would have thought Ron or someone would have told you but… Well, at least you get to hear it from me. I had to have 'the talk' with Lucius, if you can imagine."

" Oh, you mean it's a sex thing?"

" Precisely. Strong orgasms, between witches and wizards… well, actually I guess we've just proved it can be wizards and wizards as well, anyway, can sometimes give-off a magical um, side-effect. Slight levitation, sparks, glowing eyes… You get the idea. My father informed me that he and my mother once turned all the bed coverings yellow. As if I really wanted to think about my parents that way," Draco said, shuddering and giving a grimace of disgust at the memory. " Still, it only occurred the once for them; Lucius said that you have to be highly emotionally involved, which leaves my mother quite out of the picture. It's also more likely to happen if the couple are reasonably powerful, magically speaking."

Harry took a moment to digest this bit of information. " Why didn't they tell us this in school? You can't tell me some poor bloke hasn't woken up floating above his bed and had a near heart-attack because of it."

" Yeah, I can really see learning this at Hogwarts. Old, straight-laced Professor McGonagall telling a bunch of third years that sometime later when they're getting off with someone, they might let loose a little wild magic. No, I can't see parents complaining about that," Draco said sarcastically.

" Oh shut-up. *I* would have liked to have known," Harry said huffily.

" I'm sorry I teased you," Draco said, mollifying Harry somewhat. " Isn't it great though? I wonder if we'll get different happenings, or if glowing eyes is our signature magic?"

" I guess it is pretty neat," Harry said. Draco's eyes were already dimming back to their original grey, and Harry, now that he knew how it was caused, was sad to see it go. He quirked an eyebrow at Draco, " Did you really get a 'birds and the bees' chat from Lucius? I'm sorry, I just can't picture it."

" Well, it was no jolly, quality bonding time, let me assure you. I was eleven and on my way to Hogwarts when he called me into his study. ' Boy, get in here. Your mother says I have to talk to you about sex. I personally couldn't care less what, or who, you do, so long as you don't get some stupid girl up the duff.'"

" He did not say that," Harry said.

" Well, it was something to that effect; I admit I became more interested in the pattern on the rug then what my father was saying, and stopped listening. After more than a few brandies, it was one tasteless story after another, as he described his many exploits. You can't blame me for blocking that out."

" No, and I don't really need the visual either thanks," Harry said, squirming.

" Good point," Draco said firmly, and fell silent. Harry reached down to the foot of the bed and retrieved the blankets. He tucked the covers around their rapidly cooling bodies, and curled up against Draco.

" Don't get too comfortable. You have class in an hour," Draco said.

Harry snorted with laughter, " Screw school. There's no way I'm going now."

" You didn't go yesterday…"
" I'm aware of that *mother*," Harry said tauntingly. " If I can skip class to hang out with my friends, then I can certainly skip to stay home in bed with you."

" You're such a rebel," Draco said, dead-panning. " But, I am glad you're staying."

Harry let his head rest against Draco's shoulder, and drifted off to sleep.

Daylight flooded the bedroom despite the closed drapes on the bedroom's windows. Harry checked the time and saw that only a few hours had gone by. Right now he would be in his anthropology class. Harry watched the slight rise and fall of Draco's smooth, uncovered chest, and decided he was getting a much more worthwhile education by staying home.

As though aware that he was being watched, Draco's blond eyelashes fluttered open. " I fell asleep?"

" You're surprised after what we did?"

" Hmm, I guess not. I did do all the work," Draco said, the corners of his mouth twitching.

" We'll have to switch positions the next time then."

Draco pretended to be pondering quite seriously. " I'm not so sure Harry. You are a little bigger then me, and you know I can't tolerate pain of any kind."

" Huh? I'm not that much bigger then you am I? Ten, maybe twenty centimetres?" Harry said with a shrug.

" Twenty centimetres?" Draco blurted out. " Someone sure has a high opinion of himself."

" Well, how tall are you then?" Harry asked. Draco stared at him incredulously, and then started shaking his head.

" Sometimes Harry… I'm not talking about height, you geek."

" Then what…" Harry tried to remember the conversation, and as he thought, it finally came to him. If Draco was worried about getting hurt while shagging then he must have been talking about the size of their…

Faster then Draco could react, Harry was lifting the blankets up and staring at Draco's, ahem, appendage. Draco felt his face heating up at the appraisal, not to mention that he felt a small twitch of arousal. Harry was of course fascinated by this, and peered closer with even greater intensity.

" I think we're about the same, honestly. But if you think I'm too big, well, that's fine," Harry said, finally coming to the end of his observations, and letting the blankets cover them again.

" Harry, I was only teasing," Draco said. " I have every intention of being thoroughly shagged in the near future. I'm quite curious to feel the other side of things."

" Oh," Harry said. Harry decided the reason he was so befuddled this morning was because he had not yet had his third cup of coffee, and was therefore not to blame for the many misunderstandings that had happened.

" Harry?" Draco asked tentatively.

" Yes?"

" If I hadn't been kidding, if I seriously hadn't wanted you to fuck me, would you really have been okay with that? It wouldn't have made you mad at me? Even if I said I never, ever wanted that from you, you'd still stay with me?"

" Of course. I only want what you want," Harry said. That was the first question all morning where Harry was completely sure of the answer. However, Draco was looking at him rather intensely, and Harry wondered if he had screwed up yet again. " What?"

" That's just so… So you! So Harry," Draco said eventually. " You know, if it's possible, I think I want you even more now."

" Really?"

" Yes, really. Come here," Draco said. Harry willingly scooted over, but was unprepared for Draco's flurry of activity. Innumerable kisses were placed gently on Harry's upturned face: first his chin, then his cheeks, his forehead, his eyelids. Finally, those soft lips of Draco's grazed

Harry's own, and promptly devoured them.

" Harry, I want my turn. I want to know what it feels like," Draco said, sliding his bare thigh between Harry's, and rubbing slightly. " Please?"

Harry swallowed nervously, and his throat felt too tight to talk. So he merely nodded, and let himself get caught up in pure sensation. They didn't need words to describe how they felt anyway; their actions spoke for them.

" Draco?" Harry asked thickly, as soon as the afterglow had faded enough for coherent thought. Harry was staring at the ceiling, some part of the bed-sheet tangled about him.

" Hmm?" Draco mumbled drowsily. Draco was also laying flat on his back staring at the ceiling. It seemed the position of choice for those with no inclination whatsoever to relocate, or maybe it was the position for people who had just been thoroughly and quite happily shagged. Both choices were applicable.

" Can you move?" Harry asked.

Draco was going to turn and look at Harry, but soon decided he didn't have the necessary energy or muscle mobility to do so.

" No. You?"

" Not really," Harry said. He didn't sound very perturbed about his motionless state, only mildly curious.

" Maybe we should consider alternating in the future. That way at least one of us can get up and make coffee."

" Yum, coffee. I'd kill for coffee right now," Harry said, hinting not so subtly. When his plea went unanswered, he went for outright begging. " Draco? Please? I'll do anything you want if you get up and make me some."

Draco growled and threw a pillow at Harry. Or at least he tried to. Somehow he missed, though the distance was minimal. Draco felt around for something else to throw but came up short. With a long-suffering sigh, Draco tried to remember where his legs were and how to make them work.

" I'm so whipped, it's not even funny."

" I love you," Harry grinned obsequiously, snuggling into the bed.

" Yeah, yeah, yeah," Draco said dismissively. Draco's pyjama bottoms were still out in the hall, so Harry not only had the benefit of staying in bed, but he also got to watch Draco's cute little

bare-end as it moved across the room and out the door. Sometimes, he really did lead a charmed life.

By the time Draco returned with two mugs of cream laden coffee, Harry had managed to haul himself to his feet, and he had remade the bed with fresh sheets. They clambered under the covers, and sat shoulder-to-shoulder, resting their backs against the headboard.

" I feel so incredibly good at the moment. Like everything is absolutely perfect," Harry said, the coffee only adding to his sense of the euphoric.

Draco sighed, " It's times like these I start to worry. If things are at their highest peak, then it only stands to reason that they'll soon start to fall back down."

" No that's not pessimistic at all," Harry retorted. " Maybe we're still on the way up, maybe things will keep getting better."

" I got you coffee, and so you owe me a totally-inclusive favour, correct?"

" I did say anything you want. So, what's it going to cost me?" Harry asked warily.

" If things do start to come apart, I want you to promise that you'll never forget this moment, or the knowledge that at this precise point in time we were genuinely happy, and that I loved you utterly and completely."

" I promise," Harry said with absolute conviction. Draco stuck out his hand and they shook on it. Harry then stole Draco's coffee cup, since his own was empty, and took a long swallow. He smiled impishly at Draco's slight scowl, " What? A promise like that values at least two cups of coffee."

In the coming weeks, there was a peculiar feeling in the air much like that of an approaching storm. At some points during the period, Draco and Harry were so deliriously happy that it seemed nothing could possible get in their way, nothing could ever bring them down. Still, there were other moments where the very walls seemed to press in on them, robbing them of any sense of peace or security. The harder the real world tried to intrude on their lives, the more effort they put into their illusions and simple pleasures.

Draco went to work four days out of the week, working on Fridays and Saturdays with Harry, and Mondays and Tuesdays solely with Mrs. Cooper. He fell into a routine that made it easy to watch the days flit by with barely a thought at their passing. Harry similarly applied himself to his schoolwork, preparing for finals with a diligence that belied any real attempt at understanding. Despite his inherent optimism, Harry began to understand what Draco had been trying to convey that day in bed. There was a definite sense of foreboding that Harry just didn't know how to dispel, or how to fight.

Hermione sent them letters regularly, feeling it was her duty to keep them informed on all things

magical, since they were loathe to do it themselves. In addition to the personal letters, she sent news-clippings, often with highlighted passages. Nine times out of ten the articles involved Lucius and his politics. At first, Harry would pore over every mailing, deepening his awareness of the situation and bringing it to Draco's attention. However, this habit soon fell out of favour since every time Harry tried to talk to Draco about his father, the two of them would end up in an argument. Draco didn't want to be reminded of anything that had to do with his father, or the life he had been forced to leave behind. Harry couldn't see the point in discussing something if the only result was to leave them both hurting.

So they ignored what was sent to them. They ignored the fact that Lucius was publicly asking for any information about the whereabouts of his son, one Draco Malfoy, who had apparently disappeared from his school over-seas. They ignored the implications of Lucius's political platform: the one that said he was going to promote stricter registration practices at Hogwarts and other magical schools (current muggle-born were to be identifiable at all times by way of a sash around their arms), and that no muggle-born would be allowed a teaching post (a part that Hermione had underscored twice in thick, angry black strokes of ink). They ignored everything they could, and sought to remain forever forgotten in their little isolated cocoon of contentedness.

" Have you ever noticed how ice cream is ice cream no matter what? Like, have you ever had bad ice cream? Of course not. There's hundreds, maybe thousands of flavours, but there's something intrinsically 'ice creamy' about all of them," Draco rambled. He was dedicating himself to the consumption of a rather large scoop of cookie dough ice cream, and philosophizing between bites. Harry was making considerably better progress on his cone of mocha-almond-fudge, since he only contributed to the conversation with a nod every now and then.

Draco had worked the morning shift at the bookshop, and then he had stopped by the rugby pitch, where Harry had been playing. After the game had broken up, Draco and Harry had decided to take advantage of the sun-soaked day, and were now slowly meandering back to the flat through various public parks, munching happily on their ice cream cones.

Harry swallowed his last bite with obvious enthusiasm, and wiped the corners of his mouth with his hand.

" Tim was hoping we'd help him and Mike move next weekend. You up for it?"

" They're moving?"

" Well, Mike's technical home is the dorms, so he's out as soon as term ends, but since he's been all but living at Tim's for the past six months, it didn't make much sense for Mike to go back to living with his parents over the summer. So they're moving into a bigger place, and making the arrangement more permanent."

" Well, I'll help. But you and Tim can do all the heavy lifting. I'm far too delicate," Draco said

arrogantly.

" You know, I think Mike said the same thing? Bunch of whiners," Harry said. Draco just shrugged off the comment, focusing again on the last few licks of his ice cream. Harry began to wish he had eaten his own slower. " Can I have a taste?"
" You had your own. Leave mine alone."

" Aw, come on. Just a taste?"

" And you were calling me a whiner?" Draco asked rhetorically. Draco waved the last of his cone in front of Harry's eyes tauntingly before eating the last of it himself. Harry shook his head in amusement, as he closed the distance between them, knowing the only way to remove Draco's smug smirk was to kiss it off.

" You taste sweet," Draco muttered. " I told you ice cream always tastes good."

" Less talking, more kissing," Harry ordered.

Draco happily complied.

They were startled out of the kiss by a sudden popping noise and a bright flash of light.

" Darn, I think I took that against the sun. Would you mind turning slightly to the left?"

Harry and Draco stared at the man with the camera as though they had never seen another human being before. Suddenly they were surrounded by a whole flurry of clicks and flashes, as people with cameras seemed to materialize out of thin air.

" Is it true that Harry Potter has been keeping you his prisoner, Mr. Malfoy?"

" Why have you run-away to the home of Harry Potter, Mr. Malfoy?"

" How long have you been here, and how long do you plan on staying?"
" Are you still angry at your father?"
" Why didn't you attend your mother's funeral? Is there a family rift that the reading public ought to know about?"

" Are you and Harry Potter friends? Enemies? What's the connection?"

" What have you been doing with yourself, Mr. Potter, since you've been in the muggle world?"

" What are your goals for the future?"

" When can we expect you back?"

Harry and Draco couldn't keep up with the barrage of questions, and were spinning from one voice to the next, the camera flashes disorienting them still further. Draco tried to take a step back from the press of people, only to end up bumping into still more reporters grouped behind them. Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously as he saw the panic building in Draco's eyes at the thought of being surrounded by strangers.

" We have no comment. Get out of my way," Harry said. He grabbed hold of Draco's hand and began pulling him in the direction of the flat, which was thankfully nearby, shoving bodies out of their path gently but determinedly.

" Is it true that you support Lucius Malfoy's campaign promises?"

Harry was so surprised by the question that he let slip an outraged, " What?"

" Lucius Malfoy claims that through Draco Malfoy, you've become a close, personal, friend of his? Just how close are you?"

Harry clamped his mouth shut before he said something he would regret. He continued to grit out a litany of 'no comments' as he and Draco made slow and steady progress towards the flat. They eventually broke free from the swarm of media personnel, and gained access to the lobby of the flat.

The landlord came out of his room to ask about the people on the sidewalk. Harry floundered for an excuse, but it was Draco who smoothly interjected with the explanation that Harry had won a small amount of money in the lottery. The landlord had no intention of letting anyone who wasn't a tenant gain access to the building, but Draco's promise to share some of the wealth if stronger precautions were taken, definitely improved the security.

" Oddly dressed bunch they are; I don't fancy letting them in regardless."

" Thanks," Harry muttered. Draco and Harry quickly fled up to their flat, and were appalled to find a dozen or more owls sitting on the balcony railing, waiting for a response to the pile of mail that was littered on the balcony floor. Harry pulled all the blinds closed, and then sat down heavily on the couch.

" This is so not good. Not good at all. What are we supposed to do? They're not going to leave until they get their questions answered, and even then they'll probably demand an interview. How are we supposed to explain away a group of masquerading wizards setting up camp on our doorstop?" Harry demanded anxiously.

" I don't know," Draco said, beginning to pace the length of the living room. " How are we going to get out of here even? We can stay in tomorrow, but we have places to be on Monday."

" Fuck!" Harry exclaimed, feeling the situation definitely warranted a curse or two. " If we could apparate out of here or something… Oh man, can those people apparate into the flat?"

" Well, it's illegal. But I doubt that will stop the rabble for long," Draco said, dropping onto the couch next to Harry. Harry put an arm across Draco's shoulders, and tried to think of a way out of their situation.

" Do you think it's true? Do you think people believe I'm supporting your father's views? I hate to think of people giving him their votes out of admiration for me. It makes me feel sick."

" I don't know what's going on. But I think it's obvious my father knows where I am now, and that I'm here with you. Let's hope that photo of us kissing really was ruined by the sun. That's the last thing we need."

" I didn't even think of that," Harry said, going pale. Draco wrapped his arms around Harry and gave him a sympathetic hug. Harry felt the anger burning brighter as he realized his personal life was once again about to be made into front-page news. Didn't he ever get to keep anything private? The last thing he wanted to see was his relationship with Draco turned into some tawdry affair. A long list of expletives spilled from his mouth just picturing some of the lurid headlines.

" Harry! Language!" Hermione admonished, as she suddenly appeared in the living room with an audible pop.

" What are you doing here?" Harry asked, surprised but very pleased to see a friendly face.

" It's all over the radio how Draco Malfoy has been found, and the secret location of Harry Potter's residence revealed."

" Secret? They just have to look in the muggle phone book and make a few calls," Harry grumbled. Fortunately for his privacy, people from the magical world rarely considered the more mundane ways of gathering information, always figuring that Harry Potter would have some extravagant method of declaring himself and dismissing the idea that he would do something as simple as list himself in the directory.

" Anyway, Ron and I figured that the media was probably already dispatched, and that the two of you might be somewhat hindered."

" Trapped is more accurate," Draco said sullenly. Draco was frightened, beginning to feel like a prisoner again. He didn't know what was happening, which only made things worse, and he had this awful feeling that things were only going to get more difficult.

" I can apparate you both, one at a time, to the Burrow. You should be alright there for a few days," Hermione suggested.

" In the meantime I have to miss school, Draco has to miss work, and all because people have to pry into our business."

" It's more then that, Harry. This thing with Lucius Malfoy. It's bad, really bad."

" What am I supposed to do about it?" Harry snarled at her. At Hermione's wince, Harry instantly regretted snapping at her. " Sorry, this is all just a little too much right now."

" Of course, I understand. So why don't you both pack up a few things, and make some phone calls, and we'll get you to the Burrow where you can have some breathing room, and time to think?"

Harry nodded, and went to call Mrs. Cooper at the bookshop. Mrs. Cooper was thrilled at the idea of her boys going away together for a few days, and Harry didn't have the heart to tell her it wasn't a pleasure trip. He next called Tim, and gave him a brief sketch of the day's events, and told him he wasn't sure when he would be returning. Harry promised to call Tim as soon as there was any concrete information.

When Harry rang off, he saw that Draco was watching him with solemn eyes. Two packed bags lay at his feet.

" I packed some clothes for you, anything else you want?"

Harry considered the question for a moment, before heading into the living room. He hauled out the old school trunk, and lifted the lid. He picked up his wand case before closing the trunk again. Handing it wordlessly to Draco, he then dragged a kitchen chair up to the hall closet, stood on it, and then reached into the far recesses of the top shelf. He felt around for a moment, before pulling back triumphantly with a whole lot of nothing in his hands. Nothing turned out to be his old Firebolt broom wrapped in an invisibility cloak.

" One never knows," Harry said quietly, adding these objects to the pile. " Guess that's it."

" Who wants to go first?" Hermione asked.

" Take Draco," Harry said. Draco and Hermione disappeared, and Harry took a last look around his flat, wondering if he had forgotten anything. His instincts were telling him to take a good look at his home, because things were about to change drastically. Harry closed his eyes, and hoped his instincts were wrong, because he wasn't prepared to give up on all this just yet.

Hermione appeared, looking a little tired from the multiple trips, and Harry said a silent goodbye to the four walls of his flat as they faded from view, replaced in an instant with the familiar surroundings of the Burrow's kitchen.

" Oh Harry, it's so good to see you. I wish they were better circumstances of course, but still, it's so nice to have you visit. And you're looking so well! Someone other then me must have been making sure you ate right," said a bustling Mrs. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley enveloped Harry in a fierce hug, and Harry remembered why he had always felt so at home at the Burrow. It had been too long, he decided, since his last visit.

" Thanks Mrs. Weasley. It's good to be here," Harry said, returning the hug with vigour.

" The minute we heard the news, mum started cooking. I hope you're hungry, she made enough to feed at least twenty of us," Ron said, grinning from his place at the large family table. Ron did not seem at all daunted by the piles of food Molly was setting out.

" Right Harry, you sit here, and Draco why don't sit next to him? You're not allergic to anything, are you?"

" No, thank you. Everything looks wonderful," Draco said politely, if distantly. It was true, the food smelled and looked appetizing but Draco felt his stomach turn over at the thought of eating. He toyed with the food on his plate, as he brooded on the situation. The dishes were cleared away, and Ron went to help his mother do the washing up.

Hermione got down to business. " I took the liberty of writing down something of a stratagem for how we're going to deal with this. The onus will fall mostly on you Draco, for obvious reasons. I've worked out…"

" What? Am I missing something?" Draco asked, confused.

Hermione blinked, and began haltingly to explain. " Well, if anyone is going to oppose your father, it's you. Harry's too high profile to be of much use. We don't want this to become a media circus, but if Harry gets involved, that's all anyone will pay attention to. Lucius has to be legitimately deposed."
" And why is it I have to do anything at all?" Draco exclaimed, feeling the beginning of a panic attack. His vision began to swim, as his rate of breathing increased. He felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. " Maybe this thing will blow over after a few days, and we can just go back to normal. Or we can disappear, go somewhere else, couldn't we Harry?"

" I… I don't know Draco," Harry said slowly. Harry hadn't been prepared for Hermione's blunt demeanour, or her aggressive attack on the situation, but he was similarly bewildered by Draco's cowardly retreat into denial. This was not the reaction he wanted to see. Draco looked like he was one step away from crawling into a small dark corner, and staying there indefinitely.

" What's wrong with you? The man locked you up for two years, and God knows what else, and you're just prepared to let that go? Don't you see? If you don't stand up to him, he will win this election, and then he'll have power over not just you, but over everyone. How can you let him do that?"

" It's not my problem! Just leave me out of it," Draco yelled at Hermione. He stood up so abruptly that the chair he was sitting on clattered to the floor. Draco slammed out of the kitchen, and eventually found the door leading to the backyard. Hermione and Harry both jumped when the back door shut with a bang.

" Harry, I'm sorry for how I handled that, but you should know I'd do it again in a second. He can't keep running from this, that's no way to live."

" But maybe he's right… I have enough money, we could go somewhere and…"

" And what, hide for the rest of your life? Harry, you keep telling me how wonderful your life is, how happy you are. You can't now turn around and claim that it would be in your best interest to give that all up. Fight this; fight this, and keep what you have."

Harry sighed, " Maybe I agree with you. But even if I choose to fight for what I want, I can't force Draco do the same. He's gone through so much already."

" You can't protect him from this forever. If you do, you'll only be destroying him as surely as Lucius tried to," Hermione insisted gently.

Harry didn't want to listen, didn't want to hear the truth in her words. But had he not been thinking the very same thing ever since Draco had first appeared on his doorstep? He had known then, just as he knew now, that Draco still had unfinished business to take care of.

" Why is it always me who has to be the strong one? Why don't I ever get to be greedy, and selfish, and weak?" Harry asked mournfully.

" Because you're Harry, and you wouldn't be the person we all love, if you didn't always try to do what was right. It's why I'm trusting you now to do what's best for Draco," Hermione said softly, tears of compassion filling her eyes.

" It's going to hurt so much," Harry said. Hermione nodded, and gave him a slow hug. Harry took a shaky breath, and went to find Draco. They had to talk.

Harry found Draco in the backyard, sitting on a lopsided wooden bench, which overlooked the surrounding countryside. It was twilight, when all the colours of nature were painted a surreal shade that was somewhere between the brightness of day, and the monochrome of night.

" I hope you talked some sense into her. Running off at the mouth like that, who does she think she is?" Draco asked bitterly, arms crossed over his chest.

" She's my friend. And she only said what we didn't want to hear."

" No!" Draco cried out belligerently. " Why are you listening to her? We can do anything we want."

Harry closed his eyes, wishing for strength. It didn't help that his own thoughts were in conflict. Part of him knew he had to push Draco into dealing with his problems, while another part was screaming at him to take Draco in his arms and to never let go. Harry then had the thought that maybe the two weren't mutually exclusive. Harry sat down next to Draco on the bench and held

him close.

" Draco, you always knew that at some point you would have to face your father, and now you've run out of time. This could be your last opportunity, and because I care about you, I have to see that you take it."

" This has nothing to do with honour. Things got a little too tough, a little too public for you, and this is just a convenient excuse to make me go away," Draco said cruelly, pushing out of Harry's arms.

" That is grotesquely unfair! Draco, I can't let you throw your life away due to fear. I won't do that to you."

" What's wrong with the way things are? Are you so unhappy with me? Or maybe you're just tired of taking care of someone as spineless and worthless as me, is that it?"

" There's nothing wrong with our life, but I have to know that you chose it. I don't want to wake up one day and wonder if I was just a convenient fall back."

" You're not, I swear. Don't make me do this," Draco said desperately.

" I love you, I will always love you, and believe it or not, this is for your own good," Harry said, his heart breaking.

Draco gave it final try, pleading, " Don't make me go, don't leave me alone. I'll do anything else, I'll try harder, please?"

" Draco… This is so difficult. But I don't want you with me, just because you fear the alternative. Do you understand?"

Draco stilled, and his expression grew cold. " Go away then. Make things easier on yourself."

" Draco…"

" Go!" Draco screamed at him. Harry took a step toward Draco, but the blond turned away, his expression closed. There was nothing to do but leave, and Harry felt that the walk back to the house was the longest of his life.

Draco was listening to Harry's progress, hoping that at some point Harry would change his mind, and spin around and come back to him. He needed Harry now, more then ever, why couldn't he see that? What Harry was asking, it was too much. Draco crumbled into a little ball on the grass, and tried desperately not to cry. Was there anything he could do to make things better? Draco decided he would stay where he was until a solution came to him. Sometime past midnight, Draco finally stirred.

Walking slowly, he entered the Burrow. Hermione still sat at the kitchen table, a tepid cup of tea in front of her. He asked what room Harry was in and she led him to it. They didn't say anything else to each other, but Hermione knew resolve when she saw it. Hermione left Draco in front of the bedroom door, and he waited until she was back downstairs, before knocking softly.

" Look, Ron, I told you I don't want to…" Harry trailed off when he realized it was Draco, and not his best friend that was standing in front of him.

" I'm leaving in the morning," Draco said calmly.

" Oh, so soon?" Harry said, voice trembling. Harry had pushed him to leave, but that didn't change the fact that he didn't want Draco to go.

Harry let Draco into the room, and shut the bedroom door. He went and sat on one of the narrow beds and waited for Draco to let out what was pressing on his mind and on his soul.

" When I heard myself begging and pleading to stay, I felt such loathing for what I had become, for what I had let myself become. I don't want to be weak that way; I don't want that part of me to become permanent. I'm better then that," Draco said, not meeting Harry's eyes as he tried to explain. " Lucius wins if I can't be who I am because of what he did."

" So what does that mean?"

" It means I listened to what you and Hermione said. I'm going to face Lucius, and I'm going to get my life back," said Draco, his tone forceful and assured. His voice broke as he said, " I… I have to leave in the morning, because the longer I'm with you, the harder it is to go."

Harry stood up and put his arms around Draco tightly. They stood, swaying slightly, just appreciating being close. Harry was glad to put his head on Draco's shoulder, because it meant Draco couldn't look into his eyes. It wouldn't do to let Draco see how scared he was of letting Draco 'get his life back'. Suppose that life was one where Harry wasn't included? Harry wanted to ask if Draco was planning on coming back to him, but knew he couldn't weigh Draco down with yet another burden. This ordeal had to be about Draco's needs, and not his own. He would just have to hope and pray that Draco would still want him when this was over.

Eventually they broke apart, and Harry went over to his baggage.

" Here, I want you to take the invisibility cloak, and my broom," Harry said. Draco took the items with a nod, and placed them over his own small bag of clothes. " I wish I could go with you, instead of just my possessions."

" So do I, but Hermione was right. You would only get me into more trouble. I'm going to have to sneak around, and dig up some proof of my abuse, and it'll be easier if I'm alone. Besides, subterfuge is a Slytherin quality. Wouldn't want to taint the Gryffindor Golden boy with any of that, would we?" Draco said, trying to ease some of the tension.

" I suppose not," Harry said. Draco noticed Harry was nervously twiddling with his wand case. Harry lifted the lid, and showed Draco the broken wand held within. Harry closed his eyes and concentrated, running his fingers over the two pieces of gleaming wood. There was brief flash of white light, and the wand was once again whole. " You should take this as well, just in case."

" I can't take your wand, Harry. It won't work for me anyway," said Draco, awed by the gesture nonetheless.

Harry grinned, " Well, well, well. For the first time, I do believe I know something about magic that Draco Malfoy does not."

" Doubtful," Draco said.

" Wands are an extension of the owner, they are powered through our wants and desires. It's why I could fix my wand, because I willed it to be so. And now I'm willing it to protect you," Harry said, passing Draco his wand, who took hold of it instinctively. Draco felt the slight surge of power as the wand was passed over. " It will work for you, as long as I continue to want you protected. In this case, forever."

" Oh," Draco said, for once at a loss for words. He slid his fingers over the shiny surface of the wand reverently. It was like a permanent reminder of Harry's feelings for him. " When I left you in the garden, I was so scared you were going to leave before I could give this to you. I'm glad you came back, even if it's just to say goodbye."

" I wasn't going to leave until daylight, and I didn't want to waste the few hours I had being angry with you. I'm sorry for the things I said, I was just so angry and upset…"

" Nothing to apologize for, I understand," Harry said. Draco put the wand down next to the rest of his belongings, and came over to Harry's side. He pulled Harry down onto one of the beds, and held him close. Harry's tremulous voice asked, " So what happens now?"

" Well, I'm packed and ready to go, and there's still a few hours until daybreak. That means it's time for you to take my clothes off, and prove how much you're going to miss me."

" A few hours isn't enough for that," Harry said.

" We'll just have to make do," Draco said, brushing Harry's hair away from his forehead, and pressing a kiss to the lightning shaped scar he found there.

It was not the most passionate of their encounters, not the most desperate, or the most loving. It was bittersweet, both wondering if this was the last time they would experience this, if this was the last time they would get to feel truly whole. They made love slowly, drawing out the hours, not wanting to fall asleep since that would make the morning come even faster. Despite their efforts, however, the morning did come. They tried to pretend it wasn't so, closing their eyes as

they kissed, but the sun still rose.

" You should sleep, just a little. There's no sense in you leaving completely knackered," Harry suggested. There was no denying that he was pleading for just a little more time with his love. " Just an hour or so, then we'll get up, I promise."

" All right Harry," Draco said gently. He kissed Harry's eyes closed. " Go to sleep then, and so will I."

Harry smiled, and pressed closer to Draco's body. Draco stroked Harry's hair, until he felt Harry relax into true sleep. He waited a few more minutes, letting his eyes drink in the sight of Harry's body, before he made himself get of bed. The hardest thing he had ever done, Draco decided, was leaving Harry's side at that moment.

Draco gathered his few items, needing to travel light. He headed silently down the stairs, and through the kitchen to the back door. He was startled to find Ron sitting in the kitchen.

" I thought maybe you'd be going," Ron said. He handed over a heavy parcel, wrapped in brown paper and string. " It's food, not very tasty, but it should all travel well."

" Thank you," Draco said, tucking the parcel into his bag. " I don't know if I'll be able to keep in touch much, but if I can, I'll be sending stuff to this address. Can you make sure Harry gets it?"

" Of course," Ron said.

" Thanks," Draco said. There was nothing else to say, so Draco shouldered his pack and headed out the door.

Ron called out just before he reached the door, " Good luck, Draco." Draco smiled thinly at the usage of his first name, and headed out quickly.

Draco knew his route; he had planned it last night while out in the garden. The broom would speed things up quite a bit, but he decided to walk regardless at least the first part of his journey so that he would have time to think and plan. He had only been walking for about ten minutes when he heard his name being called. He turned and wasn't overly surprised to see a flustered looking Harry, pelting down the path.

" You left," Harry accused.

" I thought it would be easier for us both," Draco said.

" Oh," Harry said, digging the toe of his trainer into the dirt. Harry's shoes were untied, the heels bent down. Harry had obviously shoved them on without any care at all. He hadn't even grabbed a shirt; a pair of grey fleece pants was all he had taken the time to put on. Draco wanted to scold him, and walk him back to the house. He wanted to take care of Harry properly, make him put

some more clothes on appropriate to the weather, and to make him coffee, which he looked like he sorely needed. Draco wanted to do all the things he had grown accustomed to doing, but he couldn't. He couldn't, and it was making his heart ache. He wanted to tell Harry how much he loved him, and wanted to hear how much he was loved in return, but he doubted he was strong enough to hear that and still be able to leave.

" I've got to go," Draco said finally.

" I know," Harry said forlornly. Draco turned, started to walk, and was ruthlessly spun around by an arm on his shoulder.

Harry kissed him. Harry kissed him with everything he had, holding Draco's face between shaking hands, and pressing his tongue into the welcoming mouth. Harry kissed him until they were both dizzy from lack of air, and still they held on for a few precious seconds more.

" That doesn't change. That won't ever change, not for me," Harry said, giving Draco his guarantee that he would wait for as long as necessary.

Draco nodded tearfully, kissed Harry quickly one final time, and all but ran down the road, away from Harry. He didn't look back, though he knew the scene behind him so well it was as if he had.

Harry, standing perfectly still, outlined by the horizon. His clothes in disarray, his shoelaces flapping, and his eyes misty behind his glasses. Draco didn't look back, because he knew the image would break him entirely.

So it was Harry who was sole witness to the growing distance that separated them, as he watched Draco until he was out of sight. Only then did he feel the cool wind sweeping across his skin; it made the wet tear-tracks on his face sting with cold.

End of Chapter 13 (NOT the story). Well, what do we think? I know you're all thinking something (hopefully it's not just how much you hate me for leaving it there) and I want to know!

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Chapter: 14

This chapter is dedicated to my roommate for her birthday. It's what she said she wanted, the weirdo. I realize few will be reading this, as book five comes out tomorrow, but still… Best to get it out now before everything changes. Author notes at the bottom. Enjoy!

It only took a few days staying at the Burrow before Harry's antics drove him and his friends to distraction. Although Ron and Hermione were patient and supportive, and despite the fact that Mrs. Weasley plied him with endless amounts of comfort food, frequently of the chocolate variety, Harry was moody and on edge. Harry eventually decided that he would prefer to go back to his flat; hopefully the familiar routine would help settle his nerves and keep him from worrying too much.

" You'll contact me the minute you hear anything?" Harry asked, as Hermione returned him to his flat. Hermione stifled the desire to roll her eyes at the query (Harry had asked the question several hundred times already), and simply replied in the affirmative. After a fierce hug, Hermione disappeared with a slight pop, and Harry was left alone.

A quick glance out from his balcony confirmed Harry's concerns that there were still a number of reporters waiting to speak with him. He pulled the curtains closed again, and headed into the kitchen for some coffee. With the reassuring thrum of caffeine in his system, he picked up the phone and dialled Tim, and told him the latest developments.

" Come here and stay," Tim said in a tone that brooked no argument. " I'll be by to pick you up in an hour."

" Thanks Tim," Harry said, before hanging up the phone. He didn't need to spend much time packing; he simply replaced the clothes he'd taken to the Burrow with fresh ones from his closet. He then took a long shower, dressed comfortably, and proceeded to wait for Tim. Harry scarcely recalled pushing his way through the desperate media people, and climbing numbly into the passenger seat of Tim's car. Mike, sitting in the backseat, was staring agog at Harry's celebrity treatment.

" Are you famous or something?" Mike asked curiously, after Tim had successfully manoeuvred the car back into traffic and away from prying eyes.

" I'd rather not talk about it," Harry said softly.

" But just think, I've been intimately acquainted with a celebrity and I didn't even know about it! It's almost like I'm famous. I'm… famous-in-law, maybe."

Tim looked over at Harry's ashen expression, and although he too was curious about Harry's circumstances, decided that Harry would tell them when he was ready. Tim tactfully changed the subject,

" I'm afraid you'll have to sleep on the floor. We've been moving and selling furniture the last few weeks, and the new stuff is going straight to the new place. Still, it means there's plenty of room."

Mike, in a rare moment of perceptiveness, added in gently, " You can have my Winnie the Pooh blanket, if you want."

Harry felt a watery smile forming on his face, and he turned to Mike. " Thanks, but I think I can manage without it."

Mike plastered a bright smile on his face, and pretended to wipe his brow in relief, " Whew! That's lucky, as I really don't like sleeping without it."

" It's true, he carries that thing everywhere. It's quite hideous by this point, and no doubt germ-infested."

" Hey! Me and my blankie can still find somewhere else to live, you know," Mike said teasingly. Tim just grinned, and Mike winked back at him: they were both glad to see that Harry had been successfully distracted by their bickering.

The following morning, Harry woke-up in the unfamiliar surroundings of Tim's home, and found it decidedly odd how life seemed to keep moving no matter what was happening. He had to get up, eat breakfast, and go to school, even though Draco was out there somewhere, alone, and possibly in danger. As he wandered the halls between his classes, Harry wondered if anyone could tell just by looking at him that he was scared to death for Draco. For the first time, he looked at his fellow students, and considered what sort of lives they were living beneath their blank exteriors.

On the weekend, he helped Tim and Mike move into their new place. Tim's old home still had two weeks left on the lease, and Harry decided to stay there for the remaining time, while he figured out what he wanted to do. He got into contact with Hermione, who handed over a crumpled letter from Draco. Harry waited until he was alone to read it.

Dear H,

This will have to be short and sweet as I have little time, and I'm worried someone might be monitoring what I write. I have been fortunate, and have met some people who share my views regarding my father. It'll be good to have some help. It's going to take more work then I had originally thought, and I know you'll understand when I say that I'm disappointed that I won't be coming home soon. I miss you. Are you all right? Of course, you can't answer me. I mean that; don't try to contact me, until I tell you it's safe to. I'll console myself with what I think you would write, if you could. Long letters filled with how much you miss my sparkling wit and charming personality, I imagine. Eat right while I'm gone, I don't want to have to fatten you up all over again when I see you next. I will try to write again soon, but I make no promises.

Yours, D.

The letter alleviated some of the immediate concerns Harry had, but he was upset that Draco was going to be gone for an extended period of time. Not for the first time, he wondered if it had been a good thing to let Draco go alone. While yes, it would be decidedly more difficult for Draco to blend-in and hide, if he had the instantly recognizable Harry Potter trailing behind him, but

surely they could have figured some way around that? But it had all happened so fast. Weeks spent ignoring the problem, had eventually come back to bite them in the ass.

Harry drifted through his days with as little thought as possible, turning his mind to problems like laundry and groceries, rather than anything more serious. Thus final exams arrived and caught him by surprise. School was over? When had that happened? Harry studied and crammed, gratefully throwing himself into long hours of revising. Finally, the last exam was written, and Harry was a free man again. He had no idea how well he had done on his tests, but he couldn't bring himself to feel anything besides relief now that they were over. He had more important matters to consider.

Having moved back into his home after the two weeks at Tim's were up, Harry had discovered his own lease was close to ending. There was little point in keeping the flat, now that every reporter worth his or her paycheque knew where Harry lived. An exotic, vividly coloured parrot sent by Sirius made Harry's decision still easier. Sirius's letters always contained an invitation to come and stay, and Harry figured that with school over, now was as good a time as any to visit. Besides, visiting Sirius would be a good way to fill the idle hours, and keep Harry out of trouble. Harry knew that left to his own devices, the temptation to do something rash and 'heroic', like striking down Lucius in the middle of a crowded street, would likely become too much. Plus, he could be just as easily reached by owl if he was with Sirius than if he were here.

Decision made, Harry had the few bits of furniture he actually owned put into storage, left some personal belongings with Tim and Mike, and headed off for warmer climates. His godfather, having been fully pardoned by the ministry, had been dully compensated for his wrongful imprisonment, and therefore had money enough to live a life of leisure. He had developed a fondness for tropical islands during his brief time as a fugitive, and rarely left the beach if he could avoid it. Remus Lupin was never far from Sirius's side, and despite all Harry's troubles, or perhaps because of them, Harry was looking forward to seeing them both.

" Harry, you may very well be the only teenager in the world capable of sitting on a glorious, sun-drenched beach and brooding," Sirius chided, handing his godson a frosty, pink-coloured drink adorned with a little paper umbrella.

" Are you kidding? Teenagers are exceptionally good at brooding. Also at angsty, whiny, pouty, and moody behaviour. I'm perfectly normal," Harry replied.

Sirius smiled, but gave a weary sigh, " I wish you were a little more normal. Still no news?"

Harry doubted that Sirius really understood how deeply he felt for Draco, but at least Sirius had made no jokes or criticisms about his choice of lover.

" No, nothing. I talked to Ron just this morning, and there's still no word from Draco. Ron says to say hi, by the way."

" Sometimes, no news is good news," Sirius said, hoping he sounded sincere. " At least there

have been no reports of him being hurt or found…"

" It's just the 'not knowing', you understand?"

" Talking to a one-time fugitive, remember? I know exactly how you feel," Sirius said. " Powerless."

" I miss him," Harry said, taking a sip of his drink, and staring out at the waves. Sirius had no reply to that, and the two men slipped into silence.

Harry did miss Draco, missed him dreadfully with a dull ache that seemed to grow with every passing day. He missed waking up next to a warm body, and falling asleep to someone else's rhythmic breathing. When something exciting happened, or something unusual, he immediately went to share it with Draco, before remembering Draco wasn't there. He would then catalogue the thought, determined to share it with him the minute they were together again. Harry missed the little things Draco used to do to show he cared: the coffee in the morning, laying Harry's clothes out for him, the reminders Draco gave him when he was acting more disorganized than usual. God, he even missed the sarcastic comments, and the sharp retorts when they argued.

Though it shamed him to admit it, even to himself, he also missed sex. It seemed like such a petty thing to be missing, considering there were far more important matters to think about, but the thoughts were there regardless. For eighteen years there had been little enough in that area of his life, but somehow in the time that Draco had been with him, he had gotten accustomed to the smouldering looks and the burning touches. During the day, he recalled the details of their time together: Draco's smile, Draco's laughter, Draco's voice. At night, in the privacy of his room, Harry remembered Draco's eyes glowing silver with impending orgasm. He remembered how smooth Draco's skin felt under his fingers, how solid Draco's body felt under his, the exquisite sensation when their arousals brushed together. And when he remembered all that, other things besides his heart ached.

Sometimes, Harry would worry about the future. Was it: 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' or 'out of sight, out of mind'? Would Draco still want him when all this was over? Or was their relationship just one of those things that worked only for a certain time, under certain circumstances? Did Draco love Harry, as much as Harry loved Draco? Did Draco think about him at all?

Draco did indeed think about Harry. He thought about Harry every time he slipped on Harry's invisibility cloak, or swung a leg over his Firebolt, or… To put it simply, Draco thought about Harry all the time. Even when he was crouched outside Malfoy manor, painfully restricting his breaths so they would go unheard by the perimeter guards, he was thinking about Harry. Once, when he had been stealthily moving around the manor's kitchen (the house-elves were not fooled by the invisibility cloak, but they recognized him and didn't know enough to be suspicious of him. Either that or they held no loyalty for Malfoy Senior; Draco rather hoped it was the latter), he had spied a plate of scones, and instantly wondered what Mrs. Cooper had done about the café nook at the bookshop. The thought was so incongruous with what he was doing, those two

aspects of his life so radically different, that he had had to stifle the urge to laugh out loud.

For once, however, Draco's mind was entirely focussed on the task ahead of him. For months he had been gathering information about his father and his father's followers, and leaking it to a group of individual's who were covertly working against his father's campaign. In the beginning, they had voiced their opinions loudly, and had sent up opposing candidates. When their third candidate turned up dead under mysterious circumstances, they decided to make their resistance movement a little less public. It was safer that way; at least until they could discover just how many people Lucius Malfoy had working for him. That's where Draco's contributions had proved invaluable. Simply listing his father's acquaintances had been enough to uncover several high up officials who were acting illegally on Lucius's behalf. The resistance group moved to slowly for Draco's liking, though he understood the need to take precautions. Allies, however, were few and far between and Draco was not about to dismiss their help. Finally, the group had agreed to let Draco undertake the most important, and consequently the most dangerous, of missions. It was time to take down Lucius himself.

Flying carefully, Draco came over the tops of the fences and hedges that guarded the manor house, and landed swiftly in a small thicket, near to the cellar door he had escaped through when he had been a prisoner. It seemed like centuries ago to Draco, like it had happened to someone else entirely. Draco propped the broom up against a nearby wall, and whispered the unlocking spell to open the cellar doors. He had gotten into Malfoy manor this way a dozen of times in the last few weeks, but tonight he was more cautious than usual. He could feel Harry's wand buzzing slightly in his palm, as though to confirm that there was indeed something to worry about tonight. Draco clutched the wand tighter in his grip, enjoying the reassuring tingle that shot up his arm briefly, before slipping inside his former home.

The house was dark, the atmosphere cold and gloomy. In other words, exactly the same as it always was. Draco shivered, wondering how he had managed to grow up in such a hostile environment. Draco by-passed the main staircase in favour of a secret passage that would lead him up a spiralling staircase to the third floor. He needed direct information linking Lucius to the murders of other candidates, or at the very least confirmation that Lucius was, and had been, a practicing Death Eater. Personally, Draco wanted to know if Lucius had killed his mother. On previous visits, he had kept mostly to the main floors, specifically the library and the study. The room he sought presently was Lucius's private den. The small room was connected to Lucius's bedroom and private sitting room, and if there were anything incriminating to be found, it would be there, where Lucius could have ready access to it. Draco knew that in the den there was a small, iron vault, hidden behind a password-protected portrait. What he didn't know was that Lucius was also there, waiting for him.

Draco was standing in the centre of the small den, his dusty feet no doubt ruining the expensive and fragile Turkish rug beneath his feet. He was waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark, when the sconces on the wall suddenly flared into light, and his father's heavy, leather chair turned towards him.

" You might as well take off that ridiculous cloak, Draco. I've wards against its magic in this

room – you should know better than most that I take no chances."

The blood rushed away from Draco's face and body, leaving him feeling chilled and exposed. He didn't really want to take the cloak off, whether or not it was still rendering him invisible. He compromised by pulling the hood down, and throwing the thin material slightly off his shoulders.

" Lucius," Draco acknowledged, pleased that his voice didn't waver. He waited for Lucius to make the first move, as he tried to calm himself down. He would need to be at his best to come out of this situation alive.

" You used to call me father," Lucius said, a quirk to his eyebrows. He gestured for Draco to sit down in a chair set in front of the desk. Draco did so, not altogether surprised at the civil gesture – even in the most trying of situations, a Malfoy was faultlessly polite.

" What can I say? I was young and impressionable then."

" Hmm," Lucius replied. He slid a blown-up, glossy, moving picture across the polished lacquer of his desk. Draco picked it up and saw that it was a photo of him and Harry kissing. It was the shot that the first reporter had taken, before the others had swarmed up to them. Apparently the sun hadn't ruined the picture after all. " Seems you're still young and impressionable. Swayed by Harry Potter? Tsk, tsk, Draco. I thought you had some taste."

Draco's jaw clenched, " I didn't see this in any of the papers. In fact, there was no mention at all regarding Harry and I being lovers. How much did that cost you?"

Lucius gave a small, unconcerned flick of the wrist, " The reporter worked for me. Most of those that arrived at Potter's domicile that day did. I let them report only what I saw fit."

" Didn't fancy the public knowing your only heir was in love with a man? Or was it because I was with the great Harry Potter?"

" Why, neither, my darling son," Lucius said silkily. " I'm merely holding this information until it can do me the most good, which is something I've always taught you to do. If I can't blackmail Potter, then at least this should secure me a few more votes from the homosexual crowd. Though my advisors tell me I'm already quite popular with that demographic; they tell me it's the hair. Does Potter comment on yours?"

Harry did comment on Draco's hair, often while running his fingers through it after a particularly tiring tryst. Lucius's comment made Draco feel dirty, and he squirmed in his seat before he could force himself to stop. It was a struggle for Draco to pull on his indifferent façade again.

" You seem quite interested in what I do with my life. If I didn't know better, I would think you cared."

" To give credit where credit is due, I must say you surprised me Draco. You know how much I

hate to have my plans waylaid, and when you left, I was more than a little perturbed. I didn't think you would go far, however, and I concentrated my search to the surrounding villages. That was my first mistake. I was also on the lookout for your signature magic, knowing you wouldn't last long without it. That was my second mistake; all that wasted energy and not a single spark from you. I was quite dumbfounded, let me tell you, when it was revealed that you were in the muggle world. That was quite a stroke of genius you had there. It was exceedingly hard tracking you down in that hovel."

" How did you find me?" Draco asked, for the first time genuinely interested.

Lucius smiled a truly wicked looking smile, and stood up. He walked across to the portrait and muttered the password, revealing the vault. Lucius opened the vault using the combination, and he reached into the depths, pulling out a small glittering object. He held the item out to Draco, who instinctively grabbed it. It was his watch, the one he had pawned when he had arrived in muggle London. A sick feeling came over him.

" What did you do to the man who gave you this? He was an innocent muggle, he didn't know anything," Draco said tightly. He remembered how nice Pat had been to him, showing him how to use the telephone, and how to get to Harry's on the underground. Pat had given him biscuits and tea. It had never occurred to him that Pat was in any danger just for helping him.

" Really, Draco. Must you always assume the worst of me? I admit it was incredibly frustrating to chase that man from place to place, only to find out the man wearing your watch wasn't you. I wasn't aware you even knew that your watch carried a locating spell. Very clever of you to get rid of it."

Hold on. His watch had a locating spell? Draco nodded knowledgeably, even as his mind began making the necessary connections. Pat must have sold the watch to someone, and this person had inadvertently led Lucius's spies on a merry chase around the world. To think, he hadn't planned any of that at all. He had just wanted some muggle money to work the telephone.

" Of course, once we caught up to this gentleman, it was a simple matter to get him to confess where he had gotten the watch from. It was even easier to get the shopkeeper to talk. Did you know he has a niece that attends Hogwarts? Small world, isn't it? Well, we barely had to hint at what could happen to his niece, and he told us everything. About a skinny blond boy looking for the home of one Harry Potter. Imagine my shock when I heard that piece of information; certainly the last place I had expected you to run to. You certainly provided more of a challenge than I had anticipated. Under different circumstances, I might even have been proud of you."

Draco scowled, unsurprised his father had threatened Pat, but angered about it all the same. He didn't even blink at the backhanded compliment his father had bestowed on him.

" Did you kill my mother?" Draco asked bluntly, through with the niceties. His father's genial expression faded, and his features hardened.

" No. She also disobeyed me."

" Good for her," Draco said, smiling slightly. " Must have driven you mad, knowing you lost control of two of your possessions."

" I know what you've been up to. I know how you and your little rebel group are trying to keep me from being elected, and I don't appreciate the damage you've already done to my supporters, but I'm prepared to be magnanimous. I'm going to win, Draco, no matter what, and I'll let you have a choice. You can be at my side when I do, or you can be dead."
Draco started to laugh. " That is by far the most cliché big villain speech I have ever heard. If I didn't know better, I'd accuse you of watching too many muggle movies. No, Lucius, I don't think I'll be joining you any time soon."

" You're mocking me? I've killed bigger men than you, Draco. Don't think I'll hesitate just because you share my blood," Lucius spat out, his temper rising.

" Oh, I have no doubts you'll try. After all, it takes a certain kind of man to lock his son up for two years, don't you think?"

" I can make that abuse seem like a holiday. You are sorely testing my patience," Lucius said. His hand started twitching, and Draco knew he was reaching for his cane, the one that contained his wand.

" I do believe you are losing your composure. Tell me, is murder your solution to everything?"

" It's worked in the past. Let's see if it'll work again," Lucius said with a snarl. The wand was in his hand, a spell on his lips. Draco raised his own wand, muttering the first defensive spell he could think of.

It shouldn't have worked. Draco hadn't cast a serious spell in years, and his knowledge was limited. The spell his father cast was a complex Dark Arts one, meant to cause a maximum amount of pain, for a minimum of effort. Draco's attempt had been a shield-spell from his fourth year textbook, dimly remembered from Hogwarts. It shouldn't have done much, but it did. The shield had shimmered like white gold, and his father's spell had rebounded, knocking Lucius from his chair. Lucius lay stunned on the floor for a moment, and Draco stared with wonder at his wand. He could still feel the tingles of energy running through his arm from the spell.

Lucius yelled something else out, and raised his wand from his prone position. Draco again deflected the spell, and his father writhed in agony on the floor. His wand slipped from his fingers, and Draco kicked it completely out of reach. His father tried to speak but all that came out at first were gurgling murmurs.

" Harry's wand," Draco explained off-hand. " He said it would protect me, so long as he willed it so. Means he loves me. I must admit I like the irony of it all: Harry's love causing me to destroy the one person who should have loved me most."

" You're nothing but a pathetic, ungrateful, useless…" Lucius had to stop his insults in order to breathe. He hacked unpleasantly, small flecks of blood-laced saliva appearing around his mouth.

" Save your breath, Lucius. You'll want to be at full strength when the authorities arrive," Draco said. There was water on the sideboard, sitting in an expensive cut-glass decanter, and well within reach. Draco didn't offer his father any.

" What authorities?" Lucius rasped out. His eyes widened in fear when he realized his body was paralysed from the neck down.

" You didn't think I'd come here without backup, did you? No, once we weeded out those Aurors of yours, it was safe to go to the authorities with our suspicions. They cast a listening spell, and heard everything you just told me."

Lucius attempted to sneer. His busted lip and bruised face made it look rather grotesque. " There are wards against listening spells."

Draco snapped his fingers, " Oh that's right. Well, I guess it's a good thing I brought this with me then."

Draco retrieved a small black box from his pocket. Draco explained to his father: " It's a tape-recorder. Muggle invention, works almost like a listening spell. It records our conversation for playback later, though it runs on batteries not magic, so it works perfectly well despite your wards. I can tell you how batteries work while we wait if you want; they're really quite fascinating. Of course, I doubt the recording will stand up in court, but I imagine it'll be enough to severely damage your reputation once I give it to the papers. As for the rest, I really must thank you for leaving the vault open. I imagine you were so busy gloating over finding my watch, and reliving the thrill of tormenting a few harmless muggles, that you completely forgot to lock it again. Oh well, works for me. Now you just rest for awhile, while I disengage the protection spells and let the Aurors in."

Draco stood up, and calmly placed a binding spell on his father, just in case Lucius happened to regain his mobility. Draco looked down at his father, and studied him for a moment. His father looked angry, but frightened as well, and he looked nothing like the imposing figure Draco was accustomed to dealing with. Lucius was struggling to rise, but other then twitching spasmodically, his limbs remained unresponsive.

" At least mother went out with a little dignity. Who's pathetic now?" Draco asked rhetorically, before giving into impulse and giving his father a vicious kick to the kidneys. " And that's for saying I have no taste. Harry's quite the catch, I'll have you know."

Draco walked steadily towards the door, head held high.

" Too good for you then. He'll drop you now; you were never anything but a charity case.

Irresistible to someone with a hero complex, you have to have realized that?"

Draco flinched but didn't turn around. *He's just using the only weapon he has left: spite. Harry loves you. He said so. Harry said his feelings would never change. Never.*

Through the stressful weeks that followed, Draco repeated these words to himself, trying to make himself believe them. The paparazzi were everywhere; Lucius's trial was the trial of the century. Even with all the evidence of the numerous crimes Lucius Malfoy had committed, there were still those few who extolled him, and claimed he was falsely accused. Fortunately, common sense won out. The majority of people were tired of the Death Eater threat, wanting to eradicate that particular evil once and for all and get on with their lives. There were many cheers when Lucius was handed a sentence of death; Draco's voice wasn't among them, though he was not unhappy with the results.

Draco was required to participate in some of the trial proceedings, and he was compelled to give testimony, some about his imprisonment, and more about his father's dealings. The media followed him everywhere, but he shied away from them; at one time he might have liked the attention, but he was still leery of strangers and large crowds, not to mention that his one brush with the media in front of Harry's flat had possibly scarred him for life. Though he had appropriated the photograph from that occasion for himself; he looked very good in that picture.

Malfoy manor was now his property, as was everything in it, save the Dark Arts materials hidden inside. He gave those over to the authorities. He didn't know what he wanted to do with the house; he had no emotional connection to the house, and most of his memories of the place were harsh ones. When he thought of the future, he really didn't see himself living in the mansion. Problem was, he couldn't decide what house he would like instead. Everything about his future seemed so murky, and Draco couldn't remember a time when he had been so indecisive. He still hadn't written to Harry. Harry hadn't written to him either, though he must have known from all the news coverage that he could.

Draco spent the time following Lucius's trial getting his affairs in order. There were endless amounts of paperwork to see to, and a lot of little details to take care of now that he was in charge of the Malfoy assets. He was working in the drawing-room, papers spread about him in organized chaos, when a house-elf appeared and told him someone was waiting in the floo arrival chamber. Draco was surprised, though he probably shouldn't have been, to greet Hermione.

" So here's where you've been hiding," Hermione said coolly. Draco nodded, feeling distinctly out of place, despite being in his own home. " Harry's back, you know. The minute we heard about Lucius going to trial, we sent him word, and he came home instantly. We couldn't get in to see you, what with the trial and all, and we didn't want anyone to think we coerced your testimony, but he sent you letters. He says you never wrote back."

" I didn't get any letters," Draco said shakily. He suddenly felt the need to sit down, and he looked around for a chair. He ended up sinking to the floor.

" Bullshit!" Hermione said, tears of anger on her face. " You promised not to hurt him, and you did. You are."

" I didn't get any letters, I swear!" Draco replied.

" It doesn't matter, because you still could've written to him. He keeps asking us why you don't write, why you haven't contacted him. What do I tell him?"

Draco let his head fall into his hands, " Tell him he's better off without me."

Hermione felt her jaw drop. " You bastard! Don't you dare do that to him. You're everything to him, can't you see that?" Draco didn't answer, didn't even look at her. *You were nothing but a charity case… Irresistible to someone with a hero complex.* Draco started shaking, banging his fists against his skull as he tried to drown out the taunting voice in his head.

Hermione was too furious to talk more. She slapped a package down on the floor next to Draco, and hurried out to the fireplace, and took the floo back to the Burrow. Once he was sure she was gone, Draco glanced at the plain brown package. He tore the paper off carefully, and revealed a photo of him and Harry. It was unmoving, a muggle photo, in a gaudy gold frame, with the words 'true love' written in glitter along the bottom. Even in the state he was in, Draco had to smile. Mrs. Cooper could be so ludicrous sometimes. The photo wasn't of the dramatic, back-bending kiss Draco had staged, but rather of the look he and Harry had shared just after. They were holding each other tightly, with their noses practically touching, and they were staring so intently into each other's eyes… They were completely unaware of anything but themselves.

Draco ran his finger down the photo softly. God he loved Harry, why was he hesitating? It wasn't too late. One little owl message, and they could be together again. As long as Harry still wanted him… And that was the problem wasn't it? Draco was afraid it had all been some dream. Why would Harry look twice at him now?

It was a few days after Hermione had visited that Draco found himself in Diagon Alley. He was there to sign a few more documents for the lawyers, and when he arrived at their offices he was given the letters Harry had written to him. Apparently, his lawyers had been filtering all his mail for possible threats. They apologized for any inconvenience.

Afterwards, Draco decided to take a look around. The first thing he noticed were the posters of Harry everywhere. Harry claimed that he was no longer the hero people looked up to, that after the war, people had been disillusioned and unimpressed with him. Draco saw no sign of that. They loved him more than ever. Every signpost featured some picture of him, every store claimed some endorsement by him, and every third person seemed to speak his name. And they never said 'Harry'; it was always the complete 'Harry Potter – the Boy Who Lived'.

Draco found himself staring longingly at the glossy posters of Harry, though he felt they didn't really do him justice. His eyes were a far more vivid green than the pictures could hope to

reproduce, and besides that, the photos were of a younger Harry, when he was still a boy. There were no pictures of the more confident man Draco knew.

Draco ducked into a nearby pub, ordering a butterbeer as he gathered his thoughts. He took a window seat, sipping pensively on his drink. At a nearby table, a mother and her young son sat, eating lunch.

" Clear your plate, you want to grow up big and strong like Harry Potter, don't you?"

The young boy, who Draco judged to be approximately ten or eleven years of age, rolled his eyes, obviously well familiar with this statement. " I'm full."

" Nonsense. You should at least eat your vegetables. I'm sure Harry Potter always eats his vegetables."

Draco smirked; knowing full well there were more then a few vegetables Harry wouldn't eat. He could just imagine Harry wrinkling his nose in distaste if he had been facing a plate full of turnip, as the boy was.

" 'I'm sure Harry Potter eats all his vegetables'," the boy repeated obnoxiously. " In fact, he's so great, maybe that's all he eats. He's the 'Boy-Who-Lived-To-Eat-Veggies'."

The mother's expression soured, " Well he certainly didn't talk back to his mother so rudely."

" Well, of course he didn't. He didn't have a mother, did he? Lucky sod," the child muttered under his breath. Draco burst out laughing, and the mother turned in her chair to glare at him. Draco let his gaze fall away into his mug, but once the woman was faced forward again, Draco let the grin steal back over his face. He liked this kid; reminded him of him.

" I won't have you using that kind-of language, young man. It's bad enough you talk to me that way, but to disparage Harry Potter who has done so much for our world… It's disgraceful."

" Well, how do you know he's so perfect? Have you ever met him?"

The mother spluttered, " Of course I haven't actually met him. Nobody just *meets* him. But I don't have to meet him to know the sort-of person he is. He's polite, well-mannered, brave, considerate…"

" … Doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, does all his chores, goes to bed at a respectable hour, never stays out late, does his homework promptly, always gets up on time… I know, I know. You've only told me a hundred times before," said the boy.

" Actually, Harry rarely gets up on time; he likes to have a bit of a lie-in. Also he has some atrocious eating habits, which includes a disgust of all things with raisins and a dependence on coffee," Draco said, speaking up. The mother whirled on him again.

" Do you mind? I am trying to talk to my son."

" I just don't think you should be filling your son's head with all that dribble. Harry's just a person, like everyone else."

" Oh, what do you know?" The woman asked, clearly exasperated. She gestured at her son, " Get your jumper, we're leaving."

As the woman settled the bill, the child turned and looked at Draco.

" Is Harry Potter really the way you say?"

" Yes, he's quite different from the rumours."

" I think I like him better, knowing that," the boy said. His mother hollered at him, and the boy rolled his eyes again.

" Thanks," Draco said, standing up and leaving money for his butterbeer on the table.

" For what?" asked the child.

" Reminding me," Draco said. The boy gave him a quizzical look, before hurrying after his mother, and Draco just smiled happily.

Everything had suddenly just clicked for Draco. All the confusion, all the uncertainty… It was because he had forgotten the most integral thing of all. That the Harry Potter he loved was not the person gracing the posters, and magazines around him. That other Harry Potter was a fiction, a myth, a legend, that the people had created in order to get through the day. Of course Draco wasn't worthy of the love of *that* Harry Potter – nobody was. So it was fortunate that Draco wasn't infatuated with that other Harry Potter; he was lucky enough to be in love with the real Harry, the Harry that loved him back. He was in love with the silly, goofy, downright clueless Harry. He was in love with the Harry that had taken him in when he'd had nowhere else to go. He was in love with the Harry who held him through his nightmares, who laughed and teased him, who encouraged him, and supported him. He was in love with the Harry who made him excited with just a breath of warm air over his ear, or a stroke along his neck. He was in love, and he missed Harry. His Harry.

" Damn, I can be such an idiot," Draco said to himself. He hoped Harry could forgive him for his moment of temporary insanity. He wrote a letter to Harry directly, needing to start over three times before it was at least somewhat coherent. He wanted to say how sorry he was for making Harry question his motives, and he wanted to say how much he loved him, but he couldn't find the right words, so in the end, he simply told him he was coming home. He would say all the things he needed to when they met in person.

After he had sent the post owl off with his letter, Draco hurried back to his mansion. He had a few last minute things to take care of, and then he had to pack. He was going home, and the sooner the better.

Harry wasn't too fond of his new flat. There was a funny smell to it that he couldn't identify, and the tenants around him were noisy. After two weeks there, he had already decided it was only going to be a temporary place, and he really couldn't bring himself to care about the cost of breaking his lease. When Draco came back, they could look for someplace better. If Draco came back, that is. Harry shook off that thought. Until he heard definitively from Draco, he would remain hopeful. Draco was simply busy, he would write once things were settled.

" Potter! Pick up your damn mail! It's overflowing from the box again!" yelled his disagreeable neighbour. With a sigh, Harry meandered down to the main floor, and checked his mailbox. Harry flipped through the stack of letters and advertisements as he climbed the stairs back up to his home, tossing most of it aside as unimportant. He dropped the entire pile, however, when he found the letter Draco had sent him. Still standing in the stairwell, he tore open the envelope, devouring the words.

Dear Harry,

I'm coming home! I know it's sudden, but there was so little time following the trial, and then there was so much legal stuff… But none of that matters. I'll explain everything when I see you, if you want to hear it. I can't wait to see you. I'll be taking the train into London, and from there I'll cross over into the muggle terminal. Will you meet me? This Monday, at twelve-forty, near the barrier. If you can't make it, or you don't get this message for some reason, then I'll try contacting you again when I arrive. At least I know how to work the telephones this time! And Harry? Never mind, I'll tell you when I see you. I'll be waiting, Draco.

Harry read the note over twice, then ran up to his apartment to check the time. It was twelve-thirty, and he had approximately ten minutes to get downtown to meet Draco's train. Harry cursed, and as he scrambled to find shoes and a coat, he vowed to never let his messages go unchecked for so long.

At the last minute, Harry switched coats. The one he'd been going to wear was too light, and he instead grabbed his heavier winter one. The weather had been unseasonably cold lately, and if Draco's train was late, there was a chance he would be standing around a long time. Grabbing his keys, Harry dashed out the door, and hurried to the train station.

Draco was thrumming with nervous anticipation. He hadn't heard back from Harry, but in truth, he hadn't given Harry much time to reply. Once he had made his decision, he hadn't wanted to delay his departure for anything. Malfoy manor was for sale, and there were already a number of possible buyers. It hadn't been a difficult choice to make.

The train pulled into the station exactly on time. Draco gathered his luggage, and heaved it onto a trolley, before heading for the barrier that separated the magical terminal and the muggle one.

Strangely enough, Draco felt no unease when he slipped into muggle territory. Apparently, the muggle world wasn't the fearsome alien place it once had been. There was really only one problem: no Harry.

Draco tried not to get too despondent. Harry was usually late; there was no reason to get worried yet. Draco leaned his elbows against his trolley, and glanced at the large clock on the wall. He'd wait half an hour, and then he'd start looking for a telephone. Draco felt better for having a plan.

The minutes ticked by; Draco unable to look away from the clock for long. Without realizing it, he had begun to bite his lip. It was also getting chilly standing on the platform, the wind buffeting him as trains entered and exited. He shrugged his hands into the sleeves of his coat to try and warm them.

" Excuse me, you wouldn't happen to know if the last train to… Oh goodness me! I remember you," said a cheerful voice.

Draco turned, surprised that he was being addressed, and recognized the woman he had first met when arriving in muggle London.

" Hello, this is quite a coincidence," Draco replied politely. " I never did get to thank you properly for all your assistance."

" I assume everything worked out for you? You found your friend?"

Draco smiled, " Yes, I found him. Actually, I'm waiting for him again."

" Well, let's hope he does a better job of collecting you than he did before."

" At least I didn't lose my luggage this time, and I know his number. Things are slightly more in my favour."

" But I see you still are not dressing appropriately. Just where are your gloves, young man?" The woman chastised him. Draco shrugged sheepishly. Actually, Draco wondered now just what had happened to those red mittens she had given him. He remembered how important they had been to him, at one time. They had been a gift of kindness, something he had had little experience of until Harry. Harry. Where was he? Maybe he was angry with Draco for not writing? Maybe it had taken Draco too long to come to his senses?

" Oh you poor dear. You look like someone's trampled all over your feelings. It can't be as bad as all that?"

" I don't know… I mean, I won't know until he gets here," Draco said sadly.

" This young friend of yours, he wouldn't be about your height with black hair and glasses, would he?"

Draco's head lifted up, " Yes. How did you know?"

" Oh, just because there's a young man over there looking at the clock and acting quite frantic," the woman said. She pointed across the crowded platform, and Draco searched the throng of people.

" Harry!" Draco yelled. He turned to the woman, " Sorry, I mean, I have to go."

" Go! What are you talking to me for? I've got my own train to catch." Draco grinned as she made shooing motions with her hands, but then she was forgotten as he turned his attention to trying to get to Harry. When had all these people arrived? And why did they have to be between him and Harry?

" Harry!" Draco shouted again, trying to project his voice over the din.

" Draco?" Harry answered back uncertainly. Draco waved his arms wildly, and Harry spotted him at last. " Stay there, I'll come to you."

Draco watched as Harry began moving through the crush of people. Occasionally, they lost sight of each other and had to yell like maniacs. Draco was past the point of caring what other passengers thought of him, and he would wager Harry was feeling the same way.

" Draco!" Draco spun around, hearing the voice substantially nearer to him than before. And then there was Harry, three steps away from him, scruffy, and tussled, and absolutely wonderful looking. Suddenly, all the sounds of the train station: the voices, the squeal of machinery, the thuds of shifting baggage, disappeared, and all he could hear, smell, taste, and feel was Harry.

" I thought maybe you weren't coming," Draco said. His hands were shaking he wanted to touch Harry so badly.

" I almost didn't," Harry replied. Draco's heart skipped a beat; he had been right before, Harry was upset with him; Harry didn't want to be there. Harry saw how Draco's face fell, and he hastened to explain. " No, not like that. I mean, I forgot to check my mail, and I only opened your letter an hour ago. I nearly broke my neck getting down here. I was so scared I would miss you."

Draco felt incapable of words, so he simply propelled himself forward, covering the distance between them. Harry had the same idea, and they met somewhere in the middle, arms and legs tangling together, bodies knocking against each other with enough momentum to leave bruises.

Their words slurred together; a jumble of 'I missed you', 'I love you', and 'I was so afraid'. Harry buried his face in Draco's shoulder, breathing in his smell, his warmth. He felt cold hands carding through his hair, and tucked Draco in closer, trying to share his body heat.

Draco pulled back, trailing a finger down Harry's face. " My Harry. I forgot how gorgeous you are."

Harry flushed at the compliment, cupping Draco's face with his hands, before lowering his mouth to Draco's slightly parted lips. " And I forgot how good you taste," Harry said, a tad breathlessly.

" Well, we can't have that," Draco said, closing his eyes, and leaning into another passionate kiss. They held nothing back, letting all their emotions flow freely between them. Harry basked in the sensations provoked by careful fingers that explored his face and neck with reverence. Draco revelled in the feeling of strong arms locked tightly around his frame. Their tongues slid and pressed against each other's; it was hot, and rushed, and tender… It was quite possibly the greatest kiss either had ever experienced. Eventually, they pulled away, resting their foreheads together, their gazes never faltering for a moment.

" Your eyes are glowing," Harry said softly, a pleased expression on his face.

" So are yours," Draco said, perfectly content. He arched an eyebrow: " Want to scare the locals?"

Harry snorted and untangled himself slightly from Draco's grip.

" Actually, I'd prefer to have you all to myself," Harry said, attempting a leer. The expression somehow ended up looking adorable instead of sexy. Draco merely laughed.

" Alright, let's take me home."

" Oh, right. Did you know I moved? The new place… Well, it's pretty gruesome to tell the truth," Harry admitted.

" Wonderful," Draco said.

" What do you mean wonderful?"

" We're going to buy a house, you and me. Something located in the muggle world, with a nice big, cozy kitchen, that's not too far from the bookshop, and that will have access to all the conveniences of the magical world."

" You've got it all planned have you?" Harry asked. He commandeered Draco's trolley, and started edging towards the exit.

" You don't like the idea?"

" I love the idea. I'm wondering how we'll afford it."

" Why Harry! Didn't you know? I'm filthy rich. I got nearly everything after the trial."

" Then why a house, and not your mansion? Why live in the muggle world at all?"

Draco stopped, and placed a hand on Harry's sleeve. Harry paused to look at him, and Draco smiled and placed a gentle kiss on Harry's mouth. " I'm selling the mansion. What I want is to be with you, to work the odd day in the bookshop, and just have a normal life. Is that okay?"

" But the mansion was your home, doesn't it bother you to know strangers will be living in it?"

" It was never a home, Harry. Wherever you are, that's my home," Draco said. " So? You willing to shack up with me?"

" Might as well. Especially now that you're rich," Harry teased.

The couple finally got outside the train station, and Draco and Harry divided up the baggage and began lugging it down the street. Harry noticed how red and chapped Draco's hands looked where they were wrapped around the luggage handles. He rummaged in his pockets, and surprised himself by pulling out two bright red mittens.

" Hey! Those are mine," Draco said, stopping and putting his luggage down for a moment. He looked at the red wool in wonder. " Where'd you find them?"

" I stuffed them in my winter coat that day we had our big argument. I decided that if you were going to leave me, I was at least going to have something to remember you by. I completely forgot about them, and I guess I haven't worn this coat since then. Do you want to put them on? You look like you need them."

Draco looked at the mittens, reaching out to rub the soft wool. " I don't need them Harry, I've got you."

Harry didn't really understand, but he stood still as Draco approached and wrapped his arms around him. As they began to kiss, Draco slipped his frozen hands beneath the warm layers of Harry's clothes, eventually finding soft, smooth skin. Harry yelped as Draco warmed his hands on Harry's torso.

" You manipulative little…"

" See Harry? When I'm with you, I have everything I need."

Harry sighed, and shifted slightly, bringing Draco closer into his body. Draco grinned as he realized he was going to get his way again – Harry was making no attempts to dislodge Draco's hands from their resting place. Harry smiled into Draco's shoulder, content to let Draco think he had gotten away with something.

They stayed that way for a long time, barely moving, not wanting anything but the other person they held. Finally, they truly did have everything they needed.

Two Months Later:

" Harry? I could use a hand, even one of yours," Draco yelled from the kitchen. Harry rolled himself off the couch where he had been talking to Sirius, and went to help. He smacked Ron lightly in the arm when Ron made a noise like a cracking whip as he walked past.

Addressing Draco, Harry asked: " What do you need?"

" Take these trays in, and see that everyone's served, if you would," Draco said, puttering around the kitchen with familiar ease.

" You're trusting me not to spill a full tray?" Harry asked incredulously, the corners of his eyes crinkling with humour.

" It has both coffee and chocolate on it. I figure the whole house could collapse with me inside and you'd find some way to make sure the tray survived. Now, go serve our guests, while I finish up dinner."

Harry took the tray and went back into the main room of their house. Ron took his coffee eagerly, hoping Harry would look away long enough at some point so he could steal the plate of chocolate biscuits. Not many of the guests knew how good a cook Draco was, and Ron was hoping to keep it that way. More for him, he figured. Hermione, however, seemed to have read his mind, and was on the alert for any biscuit thievery. Hermione smiled when she saw a delicate china cup filled with tea and a wedge of lemon, specifically for her. Who would have guessed Draco would turn out to be so thoughtful?

Sirius and Remus were staying with Harry and Draco for a few weeks, having come specifically to meet Draco. It was they who had suggested having a small party, so that Sirius could meet the rest of Harry's friends and learn a little bit more about his life. Draco had leapt at the chance to show-off, and what had initially been a small affair, turned into a meal for fourteen guests, plus Harry and Draco. Many of the guests had brought housewarming presents, since it was their first time visiting Harry and Draco's new home. Harry was a little embarrassed by their generosity, claiming the gifts of potted plants, toaster ovens, and photo frames, were not necessary. Draco, of course, gave Harry a dirty look, and gleefully inspected his horde, thanking everyone profusely.

Other invitations had been extended to all the members of Ron's family who were close enough to make the trip. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were there, along with the Weasley twins. Harry was very, very, scared to discover that Fred and George were getting along fabulously with Mike. As Harry delivered them their drinks, he was relieved to hear that so far the conversation revolved around what a natural Hufflepuff Mike would have made. As Harry was turning away to attend to his other guests, however, he heard Mike ask to see their wands. Harry fervently hoped it was a literal request. You never knew with Mike.

Tim was entered into a heated debate; he barely paused in his diatribe to accept his coffee, before plunging right back into the conversation. Dumbledore was nodding along with Tim's arguments sagely, while slyly using magic to retrieve one of the trays of baked goods. From across the room, Ron's face fell. As Dumbledore happily munched on his lemon tart, Snape interrupted Tim to clarify a point. The discussion was politics, Tim's eventual major, and it seemed the magical world and muggle world were not so very different when it came to campaign elections. The elections in the magical world were in complete disarray thanks to Lucius's machinations, and Snape was actually interested in Tim's theories regarding possible outcomes. Draco had insisted that if they were going to invite Dumbledore that they ought to invite Snape as well. Harry had eventually conceded, since he knew Dumbledore was friends with Snape, and it would look like a direct insult to omit Snape from the evening. Aside from a sneer at Harry, Remus, and Sirius, when he arrived, Harry had to admit that Snape was everything a good guest should be. Damn. He owed Draco money now.

Harry arrived at the last couple of guests, and handed Mr. Cooper his coffee. He accepted it gratefully. Harry had previously explained to the couple all about the magical world, and both had taken the news rather well, though actually meeting with Dumbledore and the others was becoming a little overwhelming for Mr. Cooper. Mrs. Cooper claimed to have known all along, and was undaunted.

" Where's Mrs. Cooper?" Harry asked, setting the final cup of tea down on a nearby table for when she returned.

" She went to the car for more film," Mr. Cooper admitted.

" I thought she had three rolls already?"

" She did. She needed more."

The only thing Harry could think of to say to that was, " Oh." A camera flash then blinded him as Mrs. Cooper returned, fully prepared for battle again.

" You are such a sweet boy for inviting us Harry. We're having the most wonderful time; your friends are so… quirky. But charming! Absolutely darling. We must do this more often. Molly is an absolute gem. Did you know she promised to show me how to make these photos move? It's incredible! Do I smell roast chicken? I think I do. Do you think Draco would mind if I popped into the kitchen? I bet he looks adorable in an apron. I'll just head in there I think…" Mrs. Cooper was already moving out of earshot, still talking. Harry and Mr. Cooper looked at each other and laughed lightly.

In no time at all, Draco was calling them all into the dining room for the main event. Everyone looked appreciatively at the mounds of food awaiting them, and eagerly took their places. Harry came up behind Draco, who was standing in the doorway making sure everything was set out properly, and placed an arm around his waist. Draco grinned up at him.

" You've out done yourself, Draco," Harry said, indicating the table. They looked around at their friends: Ron, who was already heaping his plate; Mike, who was making obscene stick-men figures with his carrots; George, who was animating those same carrots into performing a lewd dance, while Fred urged him on, and Tim who was trying to get everyone to stop. Fred turned Tim's hair pink, to Mike's delight. Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling, Snape's were… not, but Draco assured Harry he was content in his own way, Mrs. Cooper was her usual self, finding it hard to sit still. It was wonderful to have everyone here, in their home.

" They grow up so fast," Draco said, wiping away a false tear. Harry smiled, pressing a kiss to Draco's temple.

" Oh, but they can always come back to visit," Harry replied.

" Yes, I like that idea," Draco said softly. He turned and met Harry's eyes. " Welcome home, Harry."

Harry returned the gaze, as he echoed Draco's words: " Welcome home."

THE END

It's over? How can that be! I've been writing this for ten months, what shall I do with myself now? Oh yeah, start another story! I hope you'll all be as positive about the next story as you were with this one. Over a thousand reviews… and not a veela anywhere! *snicker* Okay, I'm going to answer a few (hundred) questions now, but feel free to skip this part if you want. It's just to satisfy some of the more intrepid reviewers (and to help me not go into major withdrawal). To the rest of you, I can't thank you enough! And please, tell me what you thought of the ending?

Want to know about the story, do you? Well, here's what I had planned, and here's what actually happened. I hate choosing chapter titles, and when I noticed I had a 'something the something' pattern with the first two, I decided to keep doing it. If there were another chapter, I would have called it 'Stupid the Author'. While I always intended to have the red mittens, Draco's watch, and Harry's wand, come back into it in the end, I never planned on having all their friends gathered for a meal as the finale. I was going to end it right after the 'mitten scene'. Also, I wanted Draco to have a few problems, but only decided on downright phobia after I read a few reviews. The same thing goes for Tim and Mike – they were never intended to come back after the first few chapters, but people seemed to like them, and they were so much fun to write… My roommate wants a spin-off. The eighties night was a late-night inspiration, and no, I wasn't on anything at the time. Yes, Harry's coffee addiction was based on my own. Yes, I really do drink that much. Yes, it does make it hard to sleep. I can't, however, blame my sense of humour on coffee; apparently, I'm just naturally odd. I don't know where the bum-pinching scene originated. I had no idea this was going to turn into such a long fic, but I'm pleased that at chapter seven I hypothesized we were about half-way, and it turns out I was more or less correct. The double-sized chapters really helped. I think I improved as I wrote, and a lot of that is because of your reviews, so I thank you. I'm going to miss writing this, as I laughed, and cried, and blushed

(I will never write a bedroom scene with someone else in the room, ever again!) my way through much of the story. My roommate thought I was nuts. She could be right.

I apologize for my many mistakes on homonyms, and also regarding English slang/culture/explanations… I'm Canadian, what can I say? I did my best, and I hope I didn't offend. Just wanted an interesting little story. I also apologize for all the information in this story that does/will conflict with canon – book five comes out tomorrow, so I'm claiming ignorance on that one! As it stands, I don't think I'll be writing a sequel, but I do plan on writing more H/D in future, and I hope you'll check it out. I've made some great friends from people writing to me about this story, and chatting with me on-line, so thanks for that! If anyone else wants to talk… Hey, I'm unemployed now, so plenty of time! It seems strange to think of all that's happened while I've been writing this story, and I really am sorry (though relieved!) it's done. Thank you seems vastly inadequate, but I'll say it anyway. Thanks! Yours Sincerely, IamtheLizardQueen