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Fictionalley.org
Name: Draco In Darkness
Author: Plumeria
Chapter 1 to 9

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Chapter: 1

P>**[Prologue]**

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Chapter: 2

P>**[Chapter 1]**
Dark World

The eyes that shone
now dimmed and gone
-- Thomas Moore

"...then, in 1752, the giant Melvin the Morose accidentally stepped on some goblins; this interrupted the ongoing goblin rebellion but started the goblin-giant war, which lasted for seventeen years and twelve days. During that time..."

Draco resisted the urge to slam the book shut, just to silence the incessant and irritating drone. History of Magic was boring enough already; did the charm which caused his textbooks to read aloud have to be monotonous too? It actually almost *sounded* like Professor Binns; even his Potions books got boring after a while.

He rubbed his eyes tiredly, a habit which seemed to have stayed with him as a gesture of fatigue, even though his eyes were no longer doing the work. The book droned on, and he forced himself to pay attention; there was a History test next week on material they were supposed to have

revised over the holidays, and he wanted to get his studying over with as soon as possible. That meant getting as much information into his brain the first time around, minimising the number of times he had to listen to the blasted passages.

It had been two months, two dark months, since the accident at the Quidditch match. In his victory, he'd foolishly forgotten how close he was flying to the goal hoops; the lapse had cost him his vision. Wizarding medicine could cure many things, but it could not, doctors informed him regretfully, reverse brain damage. The injury had been to the occipital lobe at the back of his head, so they said, and there was nothing anyone could do. Though his father had threatened, and his mother had pleaded, and he himself had disbelievingly demanded second, third, twelfth opinions, the answer was always the same from the medical community: blindness. Permanent.

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Harry searched the shelves at the back of the library until he found the book he was after, a review of specialised fungi he needed for his Herbology class. He dusted it off, gave it a cursory glance-through, then tucked it under his arm. There were several more books he'd need later, but he decided he'd get them tomorrow. He wasn't like Hermione, who could plow through a stack of ancient, dry textbooks in a single night. This one tonight would be plenty, in addition to his normal work. Speaking of... there was that History of Magic test next week; he needed to get started before Hermione began chasing after him with her colour-coded notes.

It was as he was winding his way through the shelves along the back wall that he became aware of a low, monotonous voice. It sounded remarkably like Professor Binns, only less interesting. Curious, he poked his nose into one of the small side rooms tucked into the wall. Then stopped short.

In the candle-lit room sat Draco Malfoy, head propped up on his fist. A textbook lay open on the table before him ... and it was this book which seemed to be talking. Either that, or someone else had an Invisibility Cloak, because Draco certainly wasn't uttering so much as a murmur, and no one else was apparent.

"Whoever you are, you should either speak up or get out. I don't appreciate being stared at."

"Er..." said Harry, startled. He watched as Draco turned his head - not to look, but to listen; his head swiveled only far enough so that his left ear was pointed directly at the doorway where Harry stood. "It's me, Harry. Potter. I ... uh ... didn't mean to interrupt. How did you know I was here, anyway?"

"Your footsteps, idiot, what else? School shoes have never been terribly silent on stone floors."

"Oh." Harry felt foolish; he hadn't thought about that. "So ... um ... is that your book talking? So you don't have to read? I wondered how you were managing that."

Draco sighed irritably. "Yes, that's how it works now. I charm the book and it reads aloud to me.

Just like a child getting a bedtime story, only much less interesting. I come here to study so the book's voice doesn't bother anyone - I don't need people staring at me because of the noise."

Harry stepped into the little room so he could hear the book more clearly. "Wow, it sounds dull. Do the books all talk the same?"

"Pretty much."

"Can't you change it?"

"No." The Slytherin's voice was curt. "Now, if you've finished playing twenty questions, I'd like to get this over with."

"You know," Harry offered, coming to stand in front of the other boy. "I could read it to you instead."

The blond moved his head to follow Harry's voice and Harry found himself slightly unnerved by his first close-up look at Draco's face since the accident; the same, pale, pointed face, yet oddly blank. He was used to the grey eyes shooting daggers at him; now they were a stone wall - flat and impenetrable, focused on nothing.

"What on earth for?" the blond snapped. Harry was oddly reassured by the fact that Malfoy's voice, at least, could still shoot daggers.

"Well ... I just thought that it'd be less boring, if I-"

Malfoy snorted. "I don't need your pity."

"It's not pity! It's--"

"It's what?"

"I'm just trying to help, okay? What's so wrong with that? You're bored, and I'm offering to try to make it less boring."

"Ah yes. How could I forget?" the blind boy drawled. "Harry Potter, everybody's hero. No problem too trivial for our wonderboy."

"What is your bloody problem, Malfoy?" Harry was getting angry - whether more at himself or at the Slytherin, he wasn't sure; what on earth had possessed him to offer to help this git?

"My problem? My problem is that you're butting in where you're not needed and are, in fact, interrupting my work. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some studying to do. Go save some damsel in distress if you're that eager to help." And with that, Draco turned back to his book, flipped back the page it had turned while they were arguing, and let it resume reading.

Harry stormed off.

The next day, however, he was back. He told himself it was to retrieve the additional books he needed for his essay and, in fact, this was the case. He ignored the fact that he didn't strictly need to be skulking around in this back corner in his stocking feet, shoes in hand, in order to achieve this. Harry wasn't entirely sure himself why he was here, but after yesterday's exchange he was curious to watch Draco and see how he managed. He hadn't seen his former nemesis much since the accident - first he'd been gone, and then he'd largely kept to himself. No longer did he taunt Harry and his friends, or, indeed, talk to anyone at all, unless spoken to directly by one of the teachers. But he somehow seemed to be compensating - he had returned to school completely caught up on missed work, he was prepared for every class, and Harry rarely saw him ask for help with ... anything. But how did he do it?

He slipped up to the little study room, determined not to be caught this time, but when he got there, he found he needn't have bothered with stealth. Instead of resting on his fist, Malfoy's head was, this time, resting on the table. His eyes were closed, and he seemed completely oblivious to the droning of the History book open before him. Apparently the boredom had proved too much today, and that gave Harry an idea.

He snuck into the room, pointed his wand at the book and whispered *"Finite incantatum"*. The voice stopped. He then carefully pulled out a chair and, setting his bag on the floor as quietly as he could manage, sat down and waited for the other boy to wake up. It didn't take long; apparently he was a believer in brief naps.

The blond sat up with a groan, sleepily rubbed his eyes and, as he became aware of the room's silence, felt around for the now-quiet book. "Stupid charm," Draco grumbled.

Harry cut in before the other boy could re-activate the spell. "The Incredible Voice prove too much of a thrill today?"

Malfoy jumped, his head whipping over in Harry's direction. "Potter, what the *hell* are you doing here? You damn near gave me a heart attack."

Harry shrugged, forgetting that the other boy couldn't see him. "I was in the neighbourhood, saw you snoozing, and came to repeat my offer."

"Are we on that *again?* I told you, I don't-"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You don't need pity. But neither do you need to be lulled to sleep by your own textbooks. Look, I have to study for the stupid test too. So, as long as I'm going over the material anyway, I might as well go over it with you."

"Why not go over it with your little Gryffindor friends?" Draco snapped.

"Because Hermione has to lead a prefects' meeting tonight, and Ron is off with his girlfriend Mandy. Look, we're wasting time here. I have to study, you have to study, and this stuff is already bloody boring. At the very least, we can keep each other awake." Harry couldn't resist adding a jibe. "Looks like you could have used that awhile ago."

Draco scowled. "Fine," he conceded. He shoved the book in Harry's direction. "You're obviously never going to leave me alone otherwise. If you're that determined to read yourself hoarse, have at it. But *do* try to be entertaining."

Harry smiled wryly as he picked up the text. "I doubt even the Weasley twins could make giant-goblin wars truly entertaining, but I'll try." He flipped back a few pages, and began to read. "'After the Snodgrass Treaty was signed in 1769, Olfred the Obtuse set up a community near the insignificant town of Herringsford....'"

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Draco started each morning lying in his bed, breathing quietly and deliberately, trying to determine if he was actually awake or not. Opening his eyes had no effect on his brain, so he would take a few minutes to acknowledge he was conscious of his body and aware of his surroundings and, therefore, not dreaming. On this morning, the chill in the air brought him to realisation quickly, and he reached out automatically for his wand, which he left in the same spot on his nightstand each night. In a practiced gesture, he pointed it at the clock, which stood at an equally precise spot next to it. *"Tempus,"* he murmured.

"Six twenty three," the clock told him.

With a groan, he sat up, hoisted his legs over the edge of the bed, and planted his feet on the cold stone floor. That always woke him up, really quick. Carefully moving around to the foot of his bed, he found his trunk, knelt down, felt around for his bathroom kit, and then, trailing his fingers along the wall, headed out and down the hall to the showers. He liked to go early, before there was much competition for the hot water.

Or others to stare at him.

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Once the mediwizards had determined he was going to get neither better nor worse, and had treated any lingering physical pains, he had been sent home with a tutor to learn compensatory skills. How to get around. How to better use his remaining senses. How to charm printed material so it would read aloud to him; a similar charm was used on special tags sewn into his clothing so they would describe themselves. How to cut potion ingredients without losing his fingers, point his wand with relative accuracy, and a host of other skills needed for him to finish his schooling and survive in the real world. He resisted anything which required another person's assistance, as much as possible. A Malfoy did not ask for help; a Malfoy did not rely on anyone who might fail him. He had been discouraged from showing weakness his whole life; he

certainly wasn't going to start now. Especially as his father had almost immediately lost interest in him.

He was no longer destined for the Dark Lord or any other positions of power, as Lucius now considered him flawed and weak. He had, apparently, no more use for his son. When the elder Malfoy was around, he was as polite as any of the medical staff had been, but that was about it. Draco was determined to prove he was still capable as a wizard - as a *person* -- just so he could mentally stick his tongue out at the man who had rejected him. The loss of future career goals bothered him less; he had never really been given a choice in the matter, and now that he had one, he couldn't think that far. His mind was too focused on getting back on his feet and away from everyone.

As soon as he could manage it, he shook off the clutching arms of his mother and Enid, the human servant who had been hired to tend to him (House Elves being too short to guide him around). For short distances -- around his room and down the hall to the toilet -- he was able to navigate on his own with measured steps, sometimes with one hand against the wall. For longer trips he was given a Leader; it was expensive, but as soon as his skills tutor had mentioned the device's existence, he had demanded one.

"What am I going to do, find someone to lead me about everywhere I go at Hogwarts, like a little child who hasn't learned to cross the street?" he complained at dinner one night.

"Yes, but Draco, darling, a human is so much more *reliable*," his mother replied, uncertainly. "What if that ... Leader thing ... misses something?"

He turned toward her voice. "Do you know how many times Enid has forgotten to mention a slight step up where the stones are uneven or, worse, something low-hanging? My housemates will be just the same; leave it up to Crabbe and Goyle and you might as well break my neck now and be done with it. What do you think the cost of the Leader is *for*? My tutor says it's the best."

His tutor proved to be correct. With some practice, mostly to gain confidence and trust in the device, he was soon able to travel most anywhere he wanted on his own, either by giving it directions, or, in familiar situations, simply stating his destination. The Leader, a small sphere about the size of an orange, hovered just in front of him at head-height, and was charmed to sense obstacles, stairs, overhangs and anything else which might interfere with his ability to move about safely. It told him when to turn, stoop, watch his feet, when the top or bottom of the stairs was reached, or when he needed to pause outright for oncoming or intersecting traffic, or for any hazards. He need only tap it with his wand and murmur the appropriate charm to activate it each time he wanted to go somewhere, and then clearly state his next directions, as needed. Although he couldn't see it, he knew the Leader glowed slightly when they were on the move, as a means of alerting other travelers around them; this nearly eliminated the need for Draco to stop for or sidestep anyone, as people, even those who had no idea what the device did, naturally veered around it. He didn't like advertising his movements like that, but, with the alternative being dependence on others to less reliably lead him about, he grudgingly accepted it.

The test came in January, when the Christmas holidays ended and he returned to Hogwarts for the first time since the accident. As his injury had happened in mid-November, the rest of the autumn term had been spent first in the hospital, and then at home learning how to survive his new dark world. Draco had insisted on keeping up with his work; the situation was already bad enough in his mind - he refused to compound it by falling behind academically and risking repeating the year. Additional tutors, therefore, brought him his assignments each week as soon as his compensatory learning skills were strong enough. Professor Snape himself had made a few calls; he'd made Draco brew the more important potions, then had departed to socialise with the elder Malfoy over dinner. Draco ate in his room as often as he could get away with it.

Therefore, when he first stepped off the train after the Christmas holidays, he was essentially up to date in most of his subjects, and theoretically armed to compensate for most issues; however, facing the reality of this new life at Hogwarts was quite different.

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Damp, but no longer dripping, a bathrobe-clad Draco returned to his dormitory and went to his wardrobe. He pulled the right-hand door open and reached for the uniform shirts which hung on that side.

"White. Solid," the tag told him, after he'd murmured the appropriate charm. Although there really wasn't much doubt he'd grabbed the right shirt - he was well acquainted with how his clothes were organised, as well as how they felt in his hand - the Slytherin in him wouldn't have put it past his housemates to slip in and swap things around, just as a practical joke. He pulled out his trousers, a tie, his "Grey. Green trim" jumper, his Hogwarts robe and his underwear, then quickly got dressed.

"Your hair needs combing," his reflection chastised; there was a mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door.

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled, feeling around for his belt loops. "Give me a minute." It took him only a few moments to finish threading the belt through, and then to neaten his damp hair; muscle memory came in handy.

"Much better," came the reflection's response. Draco smoothed his hands down his robe reflexively, checking his appearance by feel one more time. The mirror didn't seem too inclined to lead him astray, but he still didn't wholly trust the opinionated glass. Still, it was all he had, given the alternative - asking his housemates each and every morning if he looked all right, like a needy child or, worse, a vain girl. No thanks.

"Accio Leader." He held out his hand, and felt the smooth globe fall gently onto his palm. *"Tendo,"* he told it. There was a slight whirr as the device activated, and he felt the slight breeze as it rose to hover in its customary position by his head. "Great Hall."

"Forward."

Out the door he went. ("Turn left.") He almost didn't need the thing to find his way to the most frequently visited rooms. He was getting good at keeping a mental record of how many steps, how many stairs, and when the next turn would be. But he still depended on it to warn him about vanishing steps, obstacles left on the floor by Peeves, and other hazards. Today's journey up to breakfast, however, was uneventful. The Leader directed him to the end of the Slytherin table he regularly sat at now, and he took his customary seat without fanfare.

"You've got scrambled eggs in front of your left hand, toast above your plate, and muesli just to the right of that," Blaise told him. "Oh, and the teapot's here--" Draco heard a *thunk* as the teapot was set down to his right. "-by your right elbow."

This was one area where Draco had been forced to ask for help; without a person to tell him, he had no idea what exactly was being served, or where it was on the table. House Elves did much by habit, but even they did not place the dishes in precisely the same place each day or serve the same food and, anyway, items were sometimes moved around by other students before he got there. Blaise and Pansy were his most reliable informants in this area; after two mornings of "The milk is over there" from Crabbe and Goyle, he'd stopped asking them.

"Thanks," he muttered, still hating that he had to ask for assistance with anything. He got himself some food and ate in silence. He could hear his housemates stumble up to the table, yawning and gabbling before their first lessons, but he did not join in. Where he had once been the acknowledged leader of the House, he knew that he now was seen as nothing more than a fallen king; for a House that was all about power, what could a blind student do for *them*? Nor did he want their pity and scorn because he couldn't fly, because he'd lost his golden spot on the team. His former so-called friendships had never really been that close, he told himself -- more socialisation by default, or as part of the never-ending power play.

And he didn't even think about romantic relationships. As with his career, he had grown up never thinking he'd have much say in his future; Malfoys usually were married for reasons of politics, not love. The fact that Draco was gay would not have deterred Lucius in the slightest; there were always lovers to keep on the side, after all. But although his blindness had bought him his freedom, it was a moot point; he could not imagine anyone wanting him now.

It was far easier to pull away from everyone before he could be rejected. He kept to himself, lived as normally as possible, and did his work on his own.

Well, until the previous day, anyway. Draco told himself he had only done it to get the Gryffindor to shut up, but he had to admit, it had been surprisingly nice to study with Harry; he had a good reading voice. And even the initial fight had felt good - they hadn't bickered like that since ... Before. It was perhaps the most normally anyone had treated him so far, even if the subject did have to do with him. Their subsequent disagreements, however, had been far more ordinary, as they argued over the reading material and the relative importance of certain eras over others in their preparation for Binns' test.

Breakfast finished, he pushed his seat back. "*Tendo* - Potions," he told his Leader, automatically turning to the right, where the doors were. At least today he would start with a subject he enjoyed, even though it - like everything else -- was much more difficult for him now.

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Chapter: 3

P>**[Chapter 2]**
Learning

It is not so much our friends' help that helps us
as the confident knowledge that they will help us.
-- Epicurus

"Where were you last night?" Hermione asked Harry as he came down the stairs to the common room that morning.

"And good morning to you, too," he returned with a smile.

Hermione flushed slightly. "Sorry. But you know I worry about you. I didn't see you when I came back from the prefects' meeting. You must have been out late." She nodded to Ron, who had trailed behind Harry, yawning. "And I can tell *you* were out late. Honestly, Ron, a date on a school night?"

Ron grinned. "Never fear, we actually did get some studying done, in between ... er ... other stuff. Mandy's a Ravenclaw, remember?"

It was Harry's private belief that Ron continued to date Ravenclaws because they reminded him of Hermione, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Oh, fine," she said, with an impatient wave of her hand. "And please, spare us the 'other stuff'. How about you?" she pointed at Harry. "You weren't off doing 'other stuff' too, were you? Don't forget we have that test for Professor Binns coming up in just a few days."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You know I'm not interested in anyone right now. And, as a matter of fact, I was studying."

Hermione blinked, obviously not expecting this reply. Normally she had to fight the two boys tooth and nail to start studying as early as she claimed was necessary. "You were? Where were you?"

"In the library."

"Really? You normally hate it there."

"Well..." Harry hesitated, then decided to just tell the truth. It wasn't really a big deal, after all. "I went there to get more books for my Herbology research, and ended up studying with Malfoy."

"Malfoy?" Ron demanded, wrinkling his nose. Hermione just stood there, mouth agape.

"It wasn't a big deal," Harry defended.

"Well, it certainly isn't *normal*," Hermione retorted, having found her voice again. "What on earth possessed you to do that?"

Harry explained how Draco studied now, and how he'd felt compelled to combine his own studies with making life a little easier on the blind Slytherin. "You were both busy, I had to study the same material he did - why not?"

"Why not...." Ron snorted in disbelief. "I could give you quite a few reasons why not.... Don't you remember who this is, Harry?"

"Well, he was tolerable enough last night. I'm standing here unbruised, aren't I?"

"Probably only because he couldn't see where to hit you," Ron muttered under his breath. Hermione just shook her head.

"Well, no harm done. We can work together tonight - I've got all my notes arranged and-"

"Actually," Harry interrupted, "I ... uh ... I said I'd go back to the library tonight so we could finish revising the chapters together."

"Are you kidding me?" Ron's voice shot up along with his eyebrows. "You're *voluntarily* going back? To *him?* Why?"

"Because I said I would," Harry said, stubbornly. "Look, you're making this a much bigger thing than it really is. It's-"

"Oh, forget Malfoy," Hermione broke in, rolling her eyes. "Let's go get some breakfast -- I'm starving and I want to get to Potions early. You know how long it takes to chop bat spleens exactly right."

"Ugh, how can you even *mention* bat spleens and breakfast in the same sentence?" Ron moaned, as he pushed open the portrait. Harry, glad for the change in topic, grinned at him in sympathy as he slipped past, and the three of them went down to breakfast.

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While Harry ate his toast, he found himself looking across the Great Hall toward the Slytherin table. This in itself wasn't *so* unusual - he and Draco had exchanged plenty of menacing glares over the years. But Draco had been absent from school for the last six weeks of the previous term, and there had been no-one to look at. Then, when he'd come back, he'd kept almost entirely to himself and didn't seem inclined to provoke anyone the way he used to, nor could he have looked back at Harry anyway. And so Harry had largely fallen out of the habit of really *looking* for Draco, except to more subliminally note his presence in the classroom, just another student.

However, after having studied with the Slytherin the previous night, and having had more civil contact with him than ... possibly their entire school careers combined, Harry found himself watching the blond more closely again, suddenly curious to see what other tactics Draco used to compensate for his loss. He seemed to get through breakfast well enough, using a slice of toast to push his eggs onto his fork. But even amidst his chattering classmates, he sat as if he was alone: he did not speak to anyone -- not even to Blaise Zabini, who sat right next to him. Harry had already observed that Draco seemed to keep largely to himself in their few shared lessons, but was mildly surprised to see it extend to social situations as well. It seemed the Slytherin no longer initiated any interaction with either friend or foe.

The Potions lesson that morning only confirmed Harry's suspicions. While the rest of the students spoke in hushed murmurs with their tablemates about the day's concoction, Harry watched Draco work in silence, chopping his bat spleen with a surprising degree of efficiency; his fingers were curled over the organ to prevent being cut and he was almost as fast as Hermione. What looked like a Quick-Quotes Quill took notes for him while Professor Snape lectured during the simmering process; Harry only hoped it was doing a more accurate job than Rita Skeeter's had.

It was the only lesson they shared with the Slytherins that day. During lunch, Harry was too busy laughing uproariously over a story Seamus and Dean were telling to pay much attention to anything else, but, by dinner, with everyone gearing up for the night's homework, he remembered his own plans; once more he found himself gazing surreptitiously across the Hall at his study partner. The other boy sat again at the end of his table, silent and separated from the rest of his House.

When he saw Draco get up and trail his little glowing orb out the main doors, Harry excused himself to go get his books from the Gryffindor Tower, then headed down towards the library. By the time he arrived, the other boy was seated in the little side room, the candles were lit, and he was already studying. A piece of note-covered parchment was blandly reciting the day's lecture; it sounded like Arithmancy.

Harry hesitated on the threshold and cleared his throat. "Um... it's me again. Harry."

Draco terminated the reading spell on his notes. "Potter. Back again, then?"

"I said I would be, didn't I?"

"Yes, but that doesn't usually mean anything to most people. You still determined to wear yourself hoarse on all that scintillating history?"

Harry moved into the room and pulled out the remaining chair at the table. "Yes. Erm... as long as I'm not interrupting anything, that is."

"No - I was just going over some Arithmancy stuff, but I can do that later." He started to roll up the parchment, but Harry put out a hand to stop him.

"Hang on a sec." Harry craned his neck around. It didn't make any sense to him, but it also looked perfectly reasonable, not at all the imprecise notes Rita Skeeter's Quill had taken. "Was this done with a Quick-Quotes Quill?"

"Yes," Draco answered curtly, tugging the parchment away and rolling it up. "Although I don't recall this having anything to do with history." He bent down and tucked the notes into the satchel at his feet.

"Well excuse me for asking." Harry dug through his own bag in irritation. "It's just that my experience with the bloody things indicated they weren't terribly accurate, so I wondered how they could possibly be of any use for school notes or anything like that."

"Oh - they have different truth settings, didn't you know?" Draco answered, a tad more amiably. "If you don't need to be really precise, it goes faster on a lower setting. But you can set it to be quite meticulous."

"She *would* use the lower setting," Harry grumbled to himself. Then he looked around. "Er... can I ask one more question?"

"You just did."

Harry wished rolling his eyes had any impact on the other boy. "Why do you bother with the candles?" Out of habit, he gestured toward the tapers which lit the room.

"Can you read in the dark?"

"Well ... no. But they were lit the other day, when you were alone, too."

"You know, for someone who has loudly complained over the years about wanting to be normal, you can be a bit thick sometimes," Draco replied, scowling again. "It doesn't matter if I can't see - everything goes on as normal. And that includes the candles."

Harry had to admit, it made sense. "Um... thanks for the explanation," he murmured. A thousand

other questions were suddenly coming to mind, but he knew not to push his luck. Instead, he pulled out his History book. "Shall we get started? I think we left off at the Pixie Plague of 1803."

With the candles flickering around them, they got to work.

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Draco balanced the Fwooper on one arm, absent-mindedly stroking its breast feathers with his other hand while he listened to Pansy and Millicent exclaim over the apparently dazzling plumage. The Quill by his side made little scratching noises against the parchment as it recorded their conversation; presumably between Hagrid's bumbling instructions, the girls' chatter and his Monster Book of Monsters he'd be able to get a sensible idea over the bird's appearance, beyond what his own hands could tell him.

The bird was as silent as he was, thanks to the Silencing Charm cast on it - a requirement for anyone looking to avoid insanity from the bird's trilling. Draco was glad that this was one case where the noisemaker in question was made to be silent, rather than shrouding the ears of the potential listeners. They had been doing advanced repotting of some adolescent Mandrakes in Herbology last week, and he hated wearing the prescribed earmuffs; to work without either his sight *or* his hearing was miserably disorienting.

But there was nothing interfering with his hearing now; as the class drew to a close and he was preparing to head back to the castle, he heard - and felt -- footsteps approaching him.

"Malfoy? It's Harry." The familiar voice dropped down to Draco's level where he knelt, putting his gear methodically back into his bag.

"You know, you don't have to identify yourself every time, Potter. After all this time, I recognise your voice quite well."

"Oh. Er ... sorry. Anyway-" There was a slight pause. "I can't study with you tonight. Ron and I have a Divination project due soon, and I really should work with him on it."

Draco shrugged. "Since we took Binns' test this morning, I figured our little moment was over anyway. Do whatever you like, Potter; you don't need my permission."

"Umm, okay then. You'll be all right?"

"I assure you," Draco replied with a note of impatience, "that, boring or not, I can cope quite well with the normal reading charms. Go back to your Gryffindor friends. I'm fine."

"Oh. Of course." Harry seemed a bit taken aback. "Well... I guess I'll be seeing you." Draco heard a slight rustle as the other boy rose, and then his footsteps receded.

"Likewise," he muttered. "Or, in my case, not."

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"Runespoor."

He felt a warm rush of air as the Slytherin common room opened to him and he stepped forward briskly, hiding his weariness. Ignoring the chatter of his housemates - many of whom already seemed to be back for the night -- he went straight to his room and closed the door. Only then did he allow himself to give in to his fatigue; he got ready for bed, deactivated the Leader and crawled under the covers. But he didn't sleep.

He was exhausted, yes, but his mind just wouldn't shut off. He replayed the day in his head: his morning routine, the History of Magic test, Transfiguration, lunch, Care of Magical Creatures, DADA, dinner, and studying. All in a normal day's work. Even the test hadn't been too bad - he and Harry had prepared pretty well, and it wasn't like it was a major exam or anything; just a revision of holiday work. But he was exhausted nevertheless. Everything was exhausting. Everything that he took for granted less than three months ago now took twice as much energy just to survive. Walking to lessons, eating his meals, studying. Even going to bed, for God's sake. No matter how tired he was each night, he always had to take the time to hang his clothes in their allotted location in his wardrobe if he wanted to have any hope of finding them again later. His wand had to go in the exact spot on his bedside table. Everything required the extra effort of order.

He felt stretched to the limits all the time, just trying to function. He was determined to make it on his own, and he would. His fists clenched. He *would.* But he was so bloody tired. Tired of everything being just that little bit harder, when others could walk around without thinking, saving their energy for the real tasks.

Even studying wore him out tonight; despite his irritating curiosity, Harry *had* made studying that little bit easier. He was neither cosseting nor condescending, and now he was gone. Done with his little feel-good duty, and getting on with his own life. Meanwhile Draco was back alone in that little room, listening to his books, trying to keep himself motivated when all he wanted to do at the end of the day was just scream in frustration at the unfairness of it all.

He felt the prick of tears at the corner of his useless eyes, felt a knot building painfully in his throat. But he blinked and took a deep breath and willed it away. There was no point in crying. It would not solve anything. It would not give him his eyesight back, or help him succeed. He had to be strong.

Draco curled onto his side and forced himself to clear his mind of all thoughts but one.

He would succeed on his own.

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Two days later, as he was struggling with a particularly nasty Transfiguration assignment, he heard the sound of footsteps approaching his little study room. He felt unaccountably hopeful, and then cursed himself for even thinking such a thing. Harry was done with him and that was that. And, he reminded himself, he didn't need anyone, didn't want anyone. People weren't reliable. Spells were. As the footsteps bypassed his room, he realised they were too light for Harry anyway. Either a girl, or a younger student doing some arcane research in the back shelves, then.

Stupid students.

He bit his lip and tried to focus again on the task in front of him. Transfiguration had never been his best subject, but it was even harder now because he had to rely on his other senses to tell him how well he'd managed the job. And not everything liked being handled after he'd transfigured them. Today, for instance, they had transfigured a flower into a butterfly, a rather delicate procedure requiring their advanced fine-tuning skills, and had been no easy task to make sure it had turned out all right without letting it loose or accidentally injuring it. And he still couldn't tell if he had the prescribed spot pattern right. Fortunately, Professor McGonagall had been making the rounds around the room commenting on everyone's work, and he'd been able to get an outside eye to tell him his results without feeling like he'd been singled out.

So, now he sat, listening as his notes reminded him of the various important syllables and intonations which made up the complicated spell, and trying to forget the sound of the misleading footsteps still echoing in the back of his mind. In fact, he succeeded so well, it came as a complete surprise when he heard the voice. It wasn't often he failed to notice someone's approach.

"Malfoy?"

Draco jerked out of his concentration. "Uh?"

"It's - well, you know, it's me. Could I - Could I come study with you again?"

Draco was suspicious. "Why? Didn't get in enough good deeds for the week?"

"No! It's - actually, it's for me." He heard Harry step into the room and pull out a chair. "You know how we got our test results back today?"

"Yeah...." The two boys didn't share the class, but their respective lessons were both on the same mornings.

"Well, that was the best I'd done for Binns in seven years. Seriously. Even Hermione couldn't believe it. So - I was wondering if... if we could keep studying together? I'll still need to work with Ron on Divination and a couple of other things a few days a week, but for the other stuff... well...."

"You want me to help you study?"

"Sort of. I meant - just the way we studied together, with my reading aloud and the way you notice stuff I miss.... I don't know - I just seemed to learn better." He laughed. "Too bad I didn't discover this seven years ago. Could have done a lot better for myself, especially in O.W.L.s."

"I don't recall your doing too badly," Draco hedged. "Haven't you done well enough so far by sharing a brain with Granger and Weasley?"

"Yeah, I've been okay. But N.E.W.Ts are coming up, and you know how important they are. Besides, the courses are a lot harder this year - I don't even want to think about what McGonagall is going to make us do tomorrow-"

"No, you don't," Draco snorted, remembering the butterfly.

"-and since I seem to do much better this way, well, I was just thinking, if it's okay with you, maybe we could keep working together? At least some of the time?" There was another light laugh. "It's not like I can read aloud in my common room without disturbing people either, you know."

Draco thought it over. He felt somewhat lightened by the thought of working with Harry again, but also appalled that he was letting someone assist him on a regular basis. Still, it wasn't exactly one-sided....

"All right," he finally told the Gryffindor. "You can come here to study. But I don't really need the help -- understood?" Then a sly grin spread across his face. "On the other hand, I'm looking forward to hearing you try to pronounce some of those plant names from Herbology." Now that the Mandrakes had been repotted, they had moved on to a batch of rare Hungarian ferns with particularly tongue-tying names.

Harry groaned. "You're just agreeing to this so you can laugh at me, aren't you?" Then his tone got more serious. "But thanks. I appreciate it."

Draco shrugged dismissively, pushing his Transfiguration notes in Harry's direction. "Since you're so eager to study together, how about we start with this? You can impress McGonagall tomorrow with how much you know already."

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Chapter: 4

P>**[Chapter 3]**
The Duel

But it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance
-- Psalm 55

"So, do you want to work on that Potions research today?" Harry asked as he arrived at the study room one Saturday afternoon. He and the Slytherin had quickly fallen into a routine, working together on specific days, and alone on their own individual subjects on others. It had been only a few weeks, but Harry already felt as if he was grasping some subjects more easily.

Draco was weaving his wand through his fingers; he turned his head as Harry stepped into the room. "No. I was thinking of a little DADA practice. All those hexes and counter-curses and other tactics we've been learning. You up for a duel?" A trace of the familiar smirk ghosted across his lips. "Purely friendly, of course. Just for practice."

"Here?" Harry looked around the room dubiously.

"No, you twit," Draco responded with some exasperation. "Do you *want* to incite the wrath of the Library Overlord? Rules may be made to be broken, but even *I'm* not that crazy."

"Madam Pince can't be an Over*lord*. She's female," Harry couldn't resist pointing out.

"Stop smirking. Yes you are, I can hear it. And you know what I meant. Now, are we practicing or not?"

"Where?"

"Where do you think? Outside."

"Malfoy-" Harry hesitated. "Won't it be kind of unfair? I mean, I can see you, but-"

"Potter, I'm blind, not useless. My other senses work just fine, I've learned the same curses as you - at least, I'm assuming I have, given that we don't share the class - and I can still point my wand at nearly anything I want to hit. Besides, now would be a good time to learn just how well I *can* defend myself, and not when some seven-foot purple minion of evil suddenly decides to threaten me, don't you think?"

Harry bit his lip. "I'm sorry. You're right." He still felt odd about this, but Draco had a point. Besides, he *did* want to practice his dueling skills. "Sure -- let's go."

"Great." Draco got to his feet. "*Tendo* - Entrance Hall."

Harry fell into step beside him as they walked down to the castle's main doors. Although he'd seen Draco come and go during their shared lessons, and watched him from a distance in the

Great Hall, this was the first time he'd seen the Leader in action up close. He was impressed by how well it seemed to work, and stifled an urge to 'help'. Even during their lessons and study sessions he could tell how fiercely Draco stood on his own; it reminded Harry strangely of himself - he'd certainly faced enough challenges on his own as well.

But he also knew how lonely a place it was to be.

They reached the main doors, and paused. "Where do you want to practice?" Harry asked, scanning the grounds. "The Pitch would be good, but there's also the flat area down by the lake, and the clearing near the Forbidden Forest and Hagrid's cabin.

"The lake," Draco answered quickly. "I'm not in the mood to get anywhere near those Dugbogs again until I have to." Harry wholeheartedly agreed. Their study of Fwoopers over, Hagrid had introduced them to the marsh beast the other day; several students had only narrowly avoided being bitten.

As they walked out toward the lake, Harry couldn't resist turning to his companion and asking, "Seven-foot purple minions of evil?"

Draco chuckled. "Well - you never know. They could be out there. And then who will have the last laugh?"

"Oh, you will, clearly."

"Damn right, Potter. I always do."

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"Clear," the Leader intoned just ahead of Draco's right ear. It had been 'uneven ground' earlier. Draco stopped focusing on picking up his feet so much.

"I think this looks like a good spot," he heard Harry say to his left.

"Right here?"

"Yes. You can stay right where you are."

Draco stopped moving immediately; he was used to instantly obeying the Leader's directions to keep him from harm. "You haven't just put me two feet from the water's edge, just so you can watch me fall in and freeze to death, have you?"

"Would your guide-thing there let you get that close to such a hazard?"

"It's called a Leader," Draco corrected automatically. "And no, I suppose not." He wasn't used to a person giving him directions - he'd momentarily forgotten the device would have still spoken

up, regardless of anything Harry said. "Just don't try anything tricky."

"It's a duel - I'm supposed to be tricky," Harry replied; his voice was getting farther away. "Can you hear me?" he called. Draco chewed on his lip, getting a handle on Harry's location. He tried to remember the proper dueling distance they'd learned - approximately twenty feet. Yes, that seemed about right.

"Yeah." He pulled out his wand and took the proper position. "Ready when you are, Potter."

"Rictusempra!"

Draco heard the slight whirr that rushing magic always made, coming just to his right. He sidestepped to the left easily. There was a **thunk** as the spell smashed into the grass.

"Too easy, Potter," he taunted. "Are we in seventh year or second year?" He hurled his own spell in the direction of Harry's voice. *"Tarantallegra!"*

He heard a similar **thunk** and a slight swish of grass as his opponent moved. "Look who's talking," said Harry, slightly to the right of his prior position. "You'll have to do better than that if you're going to take down that seven-foot purple minion," he laughed. "*"Constringo!"*

This one came faster. Draco jumped to the side as the spell hit the ground. Almost immediately, he felt the grass reach up to bind his ankles. Hastily, he cast a Disentanglement Charm so he could break free, then whipped his wand in the direction of Harry's sniggers. *"Turbos!"*

Faster and faster the curses and hexes flew, getting harder each time, as each boy tried to remember the nastiest ones they could. Harry got Draco with one designed to make him stand on his head, but he ended the spell quickly and, to his satisfaction, hit Harry two rounds later and made him a midget.

"You'll pay for that, Malfoy," Harry yelled. He sounded remarkably like squeaky Flitwick, and about as tall. Draco bit his lip to keep from laughing as he heard the other boy squeak out a Restoring Charm. It was immediately followed by *"Tremoro!"* -- Harry's voice was back to normal.

Distracted, Draco tried to dodge the incoming spell, but didn't quite get far enough to the left. There was an ominous **crunch**, quite unlike the ground-impact noise.

"Oh, shit!" Harry swore, before he could stop himself. "I think I just broke your Leader."

Draco froze on the spot. "Is it - is it destroyed?" he gulped, afraid of what he might learn. For the first time since he'd first arrived home from the hospital, he was out of familiar territory -- without anything to guide him or warn him. He felt lost, disoriented, and it made him realise how close he was to being helpless, how just a few crucial charms and devices kept him going. Without them....

He heard Harry's running footsteps pounding up toward him, and felt a small sense of relief; at least he had *something* on which to orient himself. The Gryffindor must have knelt down, because when he next spoke, it was in the vicinity of Draco's shins. "No, I don't think so," he said slowly. "Just cracked. These things don't like violent tremors, apparently. I'm really, really, *really* sorry about this. Can someone fix it?"

"Professor Flitwick can, I think." Draco's relief was enormous. The tiny wizard had assured Draco at the beginning of the term that he was capable of any advanced charms the device might need for upkeep or repair. He held out his hand. "Let me see."

He felt the round weight fill his palm as Harry placed it there. "Be careful - some of the edges are sharp."

Draco nodded, lightly running one hand over the orb, feeling the places it had cracked. Definitely broken, but it seemed as though it could be mended. He smiled ruefully. "I should put a ward on this. Permanently. I can't believe I didn't think of it sooner. My father would have... I should have known better."

"I wouldn't have thought of it either," Harry said after a slight pause. "But I really wasn't trying to aim for your thing -- your Leader. I can't believe I broke it!" He sighed. "I'm really sorry, Malfoy."

"Yes, you said that already. Are you expecting me to hex you again, as punishment?"

"Well...." Draco could hear the uncertainty in Harry's voice; he almost smiled as he imagined the other boy standing there, shifting uneasily from foot to foot, his face a picture of befuddlement. "If this had happened last year, I would probably already be under the Body-binding Charm or something."

Draco chuckled humourlessly as he slipped the broken Leader into one of his robe's pockets. "Last year, I didn't need the damn thing. I'm already pissed off at myself for not warding this properly, but to *petrificus* myself would be pretty senseless, and there's no point in putting the Body-binding Charm on *you* because you're going to have to get me back to my common room. Without twisting my ankle in any holes or walking me into walls. Think you can manage that?"

"Er... I guess so. I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"No, you don't. Consider it your punishment. And mine, too." A fitting consequence for his lapse in foresight: forced dependence. "I'll tell you right now that I hate relying on people for this - it's why I got the Leader in the first place. So - *do* try to keep me from breaking my neck between here and the Slytherin common room, and I'll consider refraining from turning you into a squashed toadstool once we get there."

"You certainly know how to motivate a body, don't you?" Harry snorted. "Okay, fine - what do I

do?"

"Stand here." Draco pointed by his right side. He felt Harry's robes brush against him as the other boy moved into position. "Let me take your arm - and no wisecracks about walking me down the aisle or I'll reconsider that toadstool hex after all."

"Right then. Not a word."

Draco curled his right hand into the crook of Harry's left elbow. "Ok, well, now we walk. You tell me if there are any hazards on the ground *or* overhead - like tree branches or anything. If there are stairs, tell me how many and if they go up or down. If we have to move left or right or if we have to stop, I'm relying on your movements to tell me what to do. You move one way, I follow half a second later. So keep that in mind. And don't screw up."

He heard Harry mutter, "So, no pressure then?" as they started to move, but he ignored it. After months of the freedom of the Leader, Draco was suddenly aware of how dependent he was on this boy to get him back to safe territory in one piece. It had taken a little while to adjust to walking around on his own, and to remember he was just as safe - safer, probably - with the device than with a fallible human; now he felt unnerved to be holding on to Harry, to trust another person with his life like this, rather than the always-reliable Leader.

But Harry seemed to take the task very seriously, far more so than either his assistant or his mother back at the Mansion. "There's a few loose pebbles here, so don't trip on them," he said as they made their way back to the castle. Draco felt them veer slightly to the left. "Mud puddle," the other boy explained.

Draco stifled an urge to tell Harry he didn't need to be *that* meticulous; the Gryffindor was doing what he'd asked after all, wasn't he?

"We're almost at the castle steps. There's ... um...."

"Eighteen up. Yes, I remember," Draco cut in, somehow wanting to show Harry that he wasn't completely lost. He hadn't ventured outside much since the accident, but there were still Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures classes to attend, all of which necessitated navigating these stairs on a regular basis. He felt Harry slow the pace slightly until they touched the first step, then they climbed up together until his guide announced the last stair.

They were halfway to the Slytherin dungeon when it suddenly occurred to Draco to ask, "How do you know where we're going?"

"What?"

"The Slytherin rooms. You're not supposed to know where they are."

"Oh! Er... um... Crabbe and Goyle told us in second year."

"Us?"

"Me. They told me. There's a staircase down now, starting - move your foot. Right, it starts there. Looks like about ten steps down."

"Eleven. Apparently Crabbe and Goyle didn't mention that when they spilled all our secrets to you," he deadpanned.

"Oh shut up," Harry responded, laughing a little. "Forget about that."

Draco felt Harry's elbow suddenly jab him in the ribs, and he grabbed at the other boy's arm as the unseen poke knocked him slightly off balance. "Hey, what are you trying to do? Knock me downstairs?" Like lightning, he felt Harry reach out for his other arm, Seeker's grasp strong and sure, and pull him back to a balanced position.

"Er-sorry about that," came the Gryffindor's voice, all seriousness again. "I was only joking. I didn't think about.... I mean, I didn't intend to poke so hard." Harry was still holding him by the arms, even though Draco had quickly regained his balance.

He was suddenly too tired to get very angry at Harry's unthinking action. He knew he was standing right on the threshold of the last flight of stairs, and all he wanted was to just *get* there, back to his dormitory where he could move around on his own, send an owl to Flitwick, and pretend this whole moment of dependence had never happened.

"Forget it, Potter," he murmured, as Harry released his other arm. "Just - let's get this last bit over with, okay?"

They started down, and in minutes were at the stone wall where the Slytherin entrance was located.

"Put your hand out. That's the entrance," Harry directed him. Then, half lightly, half nervously, "I suppose it's too late to hope you've forgotten about hexing me?"

Draco pretended to consider. "Well, you nearly succeeded in breaking my neck just now, and you *did* break my Leader, but - you did all right," he conceded. "Better than anyone else so far, at least." His right hand brushed along Harry's sleeve as he pulled it away, resting his other palm against the cool stone to keep him oriented. "I think I'll forget the hex. This time, anyway," he added.

"In other words, don't let my guard down?" the other boy laughed.

"No, never let your guard down."

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Harry wondered at the sudden seriousness of Draco's tone. He studied the face in front of him carefully; the dim dungeon torchlight made it less obvious that Draco's eyes 'looked' unseeingly somewhere in the vicinity of Harry's right ear instead of at his face, or that there was nothing but emptiness in the grey sea.

He would sometimes forget Draco's disability, as they sat in the library discussing advanced grafting techniques for Herbology, or arguing over powdered versus grated holly root for Potions. But then Draco would turn his face full on Harry in a particularly heated moment, and he would find himself suddenly losing the argument, unnerved by the blank greyness, the passivity where there should have been a pointed stare. Even his facial expressions had changed slightly - smiles or scowls never fully reached his eyes anymore, as if he was slowly forgetting that half of his face existed.

"Potter?"

"Uh? What?" Harry blinked. Contrary to his previous thoughts about expression, one eyebrow was cocked in his direction, the pale gold line catching the torchlight in the otherwise dim space.

"You can go now." Draco's voice indicated he was amused that Harry was still standing there.

"Oh. Okay. You don't need me to get you to your room or anything?"

"Is this just an excuse to see the famous Slytherin common room?" the other boy teased. "No, I'll be all right, Potter. But I'm also not going to say the password until you're no longer within earshot. It's bad enough you know where we are."

Harry pouted. "I *am* trustworthy, you know."

"Would you give me your password?"

"Well ... not readily, no."

"So, *I'm* not trustworthy?"

"No! It's not that - well, you weren't, but now -- it's just...." Harry sighed in resignation. "Fine, I'll go. Thanks for the dueling practice, and I'm sorry again for breaking your Leader. See you in the library on Monday, as usual?"

Draco shrugged. "Up to you. *I'll* be studying there, anyway; Flitwick should have it fixed by then."

"I'll be there."

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Chapter: 5

P>**[Chapter 4]**
[Touchstones]

touch·stone *(noun): a test or criterion for determining the quality or genuineness of a thing*
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary

With Draco safely back in his common room, Harry decided there was no point in going back to the library to finish his remaining homework. Instead, he went up to his own common room to see what Hermione and Ron were up to.

Only Hermione was in sight, however, when he finally climbed through the portrait hole. She looked up from her pile of books and notes when he came in, a look of surprise on her face.

"I didn't expect you back so soon. Aren't you normally still studying with Malfoy around now?"

Harry gave her the brief version of events: how he and Draco had gone down to practice their DADA skills, how he'd accidentally broken the Leader, and how he'd walked the blind boy back to Slytherin house afterwards.

"So, anyway, I figured I'd take the extra time and spend it with you after all," he finished, looking around. "Where's Ron?"

"With Mandy, of course," Hermione answered. "I do hope she'll get him to start revising for his N.E.W.Ts at some point - there's only a little over three months left!"

"He'll be fine, Hermione," Harry placated, throwing himself down on the squashy armchair to her right. He craned his neck to look at her notes. "What are you working on?"

"Arithmancy. We've got a big presentation coming up; I've been doing a lot of reading for it, but I wish our library had more books on the subject."

Harry hid a smile as he eyed the enormous stack beside her. "Yeah, Malfoy mentioned something about having to do some research and stuff. Don't know how he's going to find anything if you've got all the source material though," he laughed.

Hermione looked mildly affronted. "I'll have finished these in a few days, and they'll be back in the library, I assure you. Besides, most of these have more than one copy. As if I would purposely keep crucial reading material from any student. Even Malfoy." She frowned. "And

speaking of - I want to talk to you about him, Harry."

"About what?"

"Why are you doing it?"

"Doing what? Studying together?"

She nodded.

"You saw for yourself how much better I did for Professor Binns," he shrugged. "I thought you'd be pleased that I want to keep improving. I know you two are probably a bit upset that I'm not with you as much, but I swear, I still-"

Hermione waved her hand impatiently. "I get that. I'm not so insecure that I think you're choosing him over us or anything. I admit I don't really understand *why* it happened this way, why you can't get the same results here, but," she shrugged, "these things happen. I fail to understand how you can stand to be with him so much - or at all, really - given who you two are, but that's not the issue here."

Harry frowned. "Then what is?"

"The issue is," she paused, as if choosing her next words carefully, "I just want to make sure you're doing this for the right reasons. You can't manage to say one good word about him for six years, then he goes blind after a game *you* played, and now suddenly you're offering to read to him, and walking him back to his common room, and - just be sure of your motives, Harry. That's all I'm saying."

"Are you saying I'm just doing this out of pity and guilt?" he asked, feeling a sudden surge of anger.

"I don't know!" she gestured defensively. "It just looks a bit odd, you know? Oh, Harry, I'm not trying to make you angry. And maybe you have nothing of the sort in mind. You've been going off to read to him for about a month now, and you watch him any time you're in the same room, as if you're making sure he's all right, and I *know* you like to help anyone who is in distress. It's one of your greatest strengths and one of the things I love about you. But I don't think Malfoy's the type to want saving, and it isn't right if you're spending time with him under false pretenses, trying to help him like a wounded baby bird, if he thinks you're just a study partner."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "And when did you start caring so much about Malfoy?"

"I don't," she replied shortly. "I'm sorry he was injured, and I don't envy him at all the obstacles he must now face. Truly. But I also remember how much of a bastard he was to all of us, and he isn't suddenly harmless to me just because he can't see. My concern is for *you* . If you're not doing this for the right reasons, if you're just doing it out of guilt or pity or heroism or anything

like that, and he finds out, then you're going to get hurt. So - just think about it, okay?"

So Harry thought. He thought while he read through his Herbology notes, and he thought while they went down to dinner. Ron joined them there, finally prying himself away from his girlfriend and sliding into the seat on Hermione's other side at the table. Harry managed to set his musings aside long enough to socialise with his housemates, but then he lost spectacularly at his nightly game of chess with Ron because he couldn't focus on the pieces. And he was awake long into the night, still thinking.

In the dark dormitory, with his bedcurtains drawn and his glasses off, he wondered if this was what it was like for Draco. Every day. How did the Slytherin stand it, just him and his thoughts and the feel of his blankets piled around him and nothing to relieve the blackness? Only a slight, blurred sliver of moonlight was visible to Harry's right, where he had failed to draw the curtains shut all the way; he was glad of it. He suddenly felt that he might drown in the dark, were he to lose that one bit of visual input.

He found himself feeling sorry for Malfoy, and wondered if there was truth in Hermione's words. Was he just acting out of pity? There probably was at least a *small* element of guilt. Everyone told him it had happened too fast, that nothing could have kept Draco from hitting the post, and for the most part, he believed them. But somewhere, in the back of his mind where his guilt over Cedric still lurked, was another small voice Harry had never been able to fully silence. *You could have warned him sooner.* He had, at least, been able to prevent further damage by grabbing the injured boy as he slipped, keeping him half-supported on his broom by sheer strength and adrenaline until they could get to the ground. But still. What if he'd noticed the danger a half-second sooner, or yelled a little louder. Would it have made any difference?

And anyway - even if a little guilt or pity had motivated his initial approach back in January, it wasn't really an issue now. He was getting just as much help as he gave; in exchange for reading to Malfoy and practicing spells, and debating issues with him, he was learning the minor variations in the smell a potion gave off during the simmering process, and how to use that information to help determine when it was time to add the next ingredient or remove it from the heat. In Herbology, he was getting better at diagnosing plant ailments by touching them, in addition to looking. All his senses seemed sharper, as if he was finally using them to their fullest extent. That combined input, together with the enhanced memory retention he experienced from reading aloud, was giving him some of the best marks he'd ever had.

And while he loved Ron and Hermione, and always would, he also found he was honestly enjoying Draco's company. For all that they had hated each other previously, they now seemed to be striking up a friendship of sorts. The banter and bickering was familiar, but lacked the viciousness of their younger years; now it was just a lively way to spice up the endless swish-and-flick practice and chapters on troll wars.

Was it wrong to feel good that Draco seemed to tolerate his company, when he resisted everyone else's? Was he acting out of pity by keeping Draco company? Or was it just being a friend? Harry thought about some of the things he'd seen and heard, of Draco appearing to exchange only a

bare few words with his tablemates at mealtimes, holding himself apart in classes, insisting on his own capabilities any time they were remotely called into question. He wondered why Draco no longer seemed interested in spending any time with his housemates, those who had eagerly clustered around him only a few short months ago. Was Harry mistaken? Did Draco still socialise with them in the privacy of the Slytherin common room? All signs indicated 'no' - otherwise, some of that camaraderie would surely have spilled out into mealtimes or lessons.

Then there was the reluctance Draco had shown to mention his once-revered father, and that cryptic remark about never letting his guard down. In some ways, he hadn't changed that much. He still gave off the impression of being angry and bitter over things gone wrong, but the difference now was that he kept it inside instead of complaining or manipulating things in order to improve his situation. To all appearances, the Slytherin had shut himself off from everyone - his family, his housemates, and, to a large extent, even his teachers. The only person he spoke to with any regularity was Harry.

With a jolt, Harry realised his thoughts had wandered, and he drew them back to the original problem at hand. He was now starting to actively worry about the other boy, but it didn't feel like pity. Just ... concern. For a friend. To be honest, he was largely starting to forget Draco's disability, until something made it obvious - like the broken Leader.

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By the time another month went by, the weather had warmed up enough to let them study outside occasionally, though they still needed their cloaks. The two boys were relaxing by the lake, both in largely good moods; the day's Potions work was done, and they were taking a bit of a break before moving on to other assignments. An early spring breeze blew around them.

"Not that I'm not glad to have you around, but - don't you miss your housemates at all?" Harry asked, as he pushed a lock of windblown hair off his face.

Draco shrugged. "Not really," he answered.

Harry was incredulous. "How can you not? You all seemed to have a great time harassing the rest of the school together. Not that I want to see you go back to that sort of thing, but -- don't you miss it at all?"

"Look, Potter, I said I don't and I don't. We're Slytherins, not sweet and gooey Hufflepuffs, brain-sharing Ravenclaws, or whatever it is you Gryffindors all see in each other. Everyone is out for their own power, and any friendships are established to either get more, or to get something else. I gave up on that after the accident; stupid little game to play."

"So, you just gave up on them, too? There isn't *anyone* whose company you still want?"

"I'm friends with you now, aren't I?"

Harry felt oddly flattered. "Yeah, you are. But I'm not in your House. What do you do once you go back to your common room?"

"I sing old musicals off-key. What does it matter what I do? I can operate just fine on my own, you know." Draco turned his head away and faced into the wind instead.

"I never said you couldn't. It just seems ... well ... lonely. Unnecessarily so."

Draco didn't move. "I *said* I'm fine," he replied tersely, in the direction of the lake. "And what do you know about being alone? You have an adoring horde following you wherever you go."

Harry gritted his teeth. "I spent ten years of my life and more than half of each summer since then completely alone, I'll have you know. Okay, fine, in five of those summers I at least got letters. But my daily life consisted of being ignored. If I wasn't ignored, I was treated like dirt. I would have given anything to have people around me. You have them - why not *be* with them?"

"Potter, did it ever occur to you that maybe I don't *want* to be with them?"

"Why the hell not?" Harry reconsidered a moment. "Okay, not that *I* would want to be with any of them, but - you got on just fine with them for nearly seven years. Why not now?"

"Maybe I don't want their pity, okay?" Draco's own anger was evident in his voice, the sound echoing over the water.

"Maybe the only person who's pitying you is *you* ," Harry yelled back in frustration. "And look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Silence.

"I can't," Draco answered coldly. "Or did you suddenly forget?"

"Well, you can bloody well *face* me when we're talking, can't you?" he snapped.

"What difference does it make? I can hear you just fine, whether I'm facing you or not. In fact, I think the giant squid heard you, you were shouting so loudly."

With an effort, Harry lowered his voice, despite the frustration still seething within. "It's not the same. When you don't face me ... it's like ... you're not paying attention. Like you don't care." He wondered absently why it was suddenly so important to him.

"I'm listening. I've listened to every damn thing you've said since we started hanging out together. I listen whether I want to or not, because there's nothing else for me to do *but* listen. And I hear a great deal more than just your words, I'll have you know." He started ticking off on his fingers. Harry watched curiously, some of the anger ebbing away. "You have this odd idea that I need constant adoration and companionship, and that the ideal place for me to get that is in

my own House. You think that just because it's true for you, it should be true for me. You like attention."

"I do n-"

"Don't argue with me. And yes, you do. Otherwise, it wouldn't bother you so much if you thought I wasn't paying attention to your Mighty Words of Wisdom."

Harry scowled. It wasn't so much that he liked attention from everyone, just from certain people. But he had to admit - Draco was one of those people. For seven years he had been on the receiving end of Draco's attention, and even if most of it had been negative, he was used to it. And he had certainly found himself enjoying the other boy's less belligerent company of late. "What else?" he asked grudgingly.

With a knowing smile, Draco finally turned to face Harry again, ticking off one last finger as he did so. "I can also tell that you're scowling."

"I am not!" Harry tried hurriedly to wipe it off his face.

"Yes, you are. Or you were. You're trying to change that now, aren't you?"

Caught, Harry couldn't help but smile ruefully. "Prove it," he teased.

To his surprise, Draco reached out in his direction, made contact with his arm, and pulled Harry towards him by the sleeve.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm 'looking' at you, Potter. I'm going to look at your face and prove that I'm right."

Harry allowed himself to be pulled closer to Draco, watching as those pale fingers reached out gently, found his face, and began exploring - first his eyebrows, then sliding over the bridge of his glasses and down his nose to his mouth.

"Okay, not a scowl - not anymore - but definitely serious. Pinchmark between your eyebrows and everything. Watch that, or you'll end up all wrinkled before your time."

Harry couldn't stop a laugh from escaping. "Not really one of my biggest concerns, but I'll keep that in mind, thanks." He started to pull away, but Draco's fingers continued to roam over his features, skimming lightly around the edge of his jaw, over his cheekbones to his nose, and once more across his lips.

"Haven't changed at all, have you, Potter?" Draco murmured under his breath; he seemed to be speaking more to himself than to Harry.

Harry held himself perfectly still as the other boy's fingers moved back up to the bridge of his nose and gently removed the interfering glasses with one hand; he held them out, waiting until Harry took them from his palm before <a href=http://www.debbiesfics.com/did4seeing_milena.jpg target="_blank">going back to his two-handed exploration. Up, over and around his eyes; he closed them automatically to keep from being poked, and he felt a brush over his lashes and over his lids before he opened them again. The hands moved up to his hairline and through a few locks of hair, and then....

"Ah yes. The scar. How could I have forgotten?"

Harry suddenly didn't know where to look as Draco traced the shape of his lightning scar. He wanted to look up at Draco's hands, he wanted to look down at the ground, he wanted to watch Draco's face even though the flat, unfocused grey eyes still unnerved him a little. And he wanted to close his eyes and focus entirely on the feel of someone touching him in such an oddly intimate way.

For a long moment neither boy moved. Then the Slytherin finally pulled his hands away and Harry, with shaking fingers, pushed his glasses back on to his face.

"Well," Draco said into the silence. "Now that we've got that bit of melodrama out of the way, and I've established that you are actually Harry Potter and not some clever imposter walking around with his voice, shall we get back to the books?"

Harry blinked. "Er... right." He looked around in a daze. "I've got my Transfiguration book here. Do you have your notes?"

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Hours later, Draco was still thinking about it.

It had felt like he was seeing Harry for the first time, but also like he was coming back to a long-lost memory. Touching him, feeling the lines of his face, the messy hair, even the scar - it made Harry *real* . Real as no one had really been since he lost his sight. He'd touched potion ingredients and books and wands, but they were *objects* , not people. He'd touched Harry before - taking his arm after the Leader broke, helping him feel the difference between two similar plants - things like that. But those hands and arms and even the voice could just as easily have belonged to anyone, even in their familiarity. The face was different though - it was clearly, unmistakably *Harry* , meshing perfectly with what he remembered of the Gryffindor boy.

He had many images of Harry in his mind, of official duels and forbidden fights, and challenging stares across the Great Hall. A whole library of memories. Yet the image that stuck out most of all was that of his very last sight - the image of Harry reaching out for him. His very last sight. How often had he pictured that moment in his mind? It was with him all the time, on constant replay like a wizarding photograph, to bring out and examine any time the endless dark became too much. He savoured that last gift of eyesight, even though the details were blurred by shock

and pain, even though his hated rival was the central focus.

Hated rival he might have been, but no more. Almost as if he knew or remembered Draco's last seeing moment, or maybe just because he was a damn Gryffindor, Harry had continued to reach out to him. First for the schoolwork and now, as the argument by the lake proved, emotionally, too. Draco didn't want it - he didn't want people to reach out for him, to coddle him or pity him. But, he thought, that wasn't what Harry had done. Most of the time he had treated Draco fairly, expecting no less from him now than he would have done before. Perhaps he'd gone a little easy at the beginning of the duel, but by the end, he was obviously giving it everything he had, and Draco had even made a few successful strikes.

In fact, Harry had always been the one to push Draco the most. Of course, back then it had been in fierce, unbending competition, as each boy strove to outdo the other. Now it was more a cooperative race of equals; they each knew what the other was capable of by now, after all. Even though the hatred was gone, there was still the unspoken expectation between them. *'Come on, Potter, is that the best you can do?' 'Hey, Malfoy, bet I can transfigure this ink bottle faster than you can.'* Draco thought about his other classmates, noting that no one else had ever pushed him so hard. Only Potter.

To see him again -- *really* see him, even if it was through his hands and not his eyes - had been like turning back the clock, giving him something he hadn't had since the accident. His fingers still remembered the feel of Harry's cheeks, his chin, that damned scar. It was a perfect image of Harry. The touch had transferred into a vivid mental picture and, because he had stared at Harry so many times in the past, Draco could now recall that face more clearly than almost anything else. He hadn't realised just how much he had missed seeing this one person who had been in his face for nearly seven years; touching Harry this afternoon had filled in a piece in his life he hadn't even known was missing.

He wanted to do it again.
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Chapter: 6

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[Chapter 5]
Soaring and Falling

Two are better than one; for they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him.

-- Ecclesiastes 4:9-11

"I can't study with you tomorrow," Harry said apologetically, as he piled his quills and ink back into his bag.

"Oh? Hot date?" Draco joked.

Harry snorted. "Not bloody likely."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot. Girls don't *like* dark, slim, clever, hero-types."

"Shut up."

"So much for the 'blonds have more fun' theory...."

"Do you *want* me to smack you?"

"Hmmm... add 'kinky' to the list of Potter-traits," Draco mused, a grin spreading over his features. "Who knew you were such a masochist?"

"Malfoy-" Harry warned. "Look, I'm not interested in any girl right now. So - enough with the 'hot date' theories. I can't meet you tomorrow because the game with Ravenclaw is coming up and we have an extra Quidditch practice scheduled."

There was a pause. "Oh, right. Quidditch," Draco finally replied, rather stiffly.

Harry bit his lip. He suddenly remembered this was the one thing Draco could no longer do. The Slytherin had played as fiercely and proudly for his team as Harry still did for his ... but now he never spoke of it. "I'm sorry," Harry murmured. "I should have-"

"No problem, Potter," Draco interjected with an overbright smile. "See you Friday?"

"Yes, of course, but-" Harry looked at his friend with concern. Draco's face was looking rather pinched beneath the smile. "Are you okay?"

The smile slipped slightly from his features. "I'm fine," the blond replied tersely. "And we can't have you losing to the Ravenclaws after all this time, can we? Go practice. See you Friday." He turned away and began meticulously packing his books and materials into his bag.

"Right," Harry said with a sigh, knowing he would get no further. He got to his feet and headed for the door. "See you Friday."

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As he walked back to his common room, he wondered why he had never really noticed it before, the fact that Draco avoided even *mentioning* Quidditch like the plague. Nothing relating to it at all. It was as if the game no longer existed to him. Harry remembered how the Slytherin had immediately scrapped the idea of dueling on the pitch, but had offered no excuse; he'd only stated why he wanted to avoid the area near Hagrid's cabin. Had he been there at the recent Slytherin match with Hufflepuff? It wasn't easy to pick out a single face in the sea of students but, given his behaviour today, Harry suspected he hadn't. It had been strange enough for Harry to see dark-haired Laynee Gruen playing as Slytherin Seeker, instead of the familiar blond; for Draco to come and hear the commentator talking about his replacement would probably have been too painful. Still - he couldn't avoid it forever, could he? Quidditch was too big a part of the wizarding world.

Harry resisted the urge to bang his head on the banister as he climbed the stairs to Gryffindor Tower; he felt like an insensitive idiot for not thinking about Draco's feelings sooner, but also felt equally angry at Draco for avoiding the issue as long as he had. There was so much he avoided.

Then again, how would he feel if something were to prevent him from ever playing Quidditch again? Harry's insides grew cold just at the mere thought of it. Would he be able to attend the games anyway, and enjoy purely it as a spectator? He loved watching the games he wasn't involved in, but it was still with the sure knowledge that he would have plenty of turns up in the sky. What if that weren't the case?

Harry sighed. There was so much he took for granted, so much which had changed for Draco, for all his insistence on normality.

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It was a partly cloudy day which greeted the red and the blue-clad teams as they walked onto the pitch on Saturday. Harry's opposition was Bethany, a blonde 5th year girl, the complete antithesis of Cho. With a surprisingly detached eye, Harry decided she was rather pretty. Her hair was easily the most appealing feature, with long silvery locks hung in a long plait down her back, but also found he wasn't at all interested in her as a whole. Ron probably would be, though; depending on how long his relationship with Mandy lasted, Harry thought he wouldn't be surprised if his best friend tried to get together with this girl at some point.

The game began and Harry coasted over the main action in a spiraling loop, watching for the telltale hint of gold from the Snitch. But he also found himself glancing down at the spectators from time to time, looking to see if Draco had come to watch. Several times he noticed a bright flash of silver-gilt not far from him, and his head whipped up automatically, only to remember that it was the Ravenclaw Seeker. The stands were full, and it was hard to pick out individuals but, as far as he could tell, Draco was not among the horde of screaming fans.

He tried to put the other boy out of his mind; the whole point behind the extra practice session this week had been to beat the well-trained Ravenclaw team, and their Seeker was amongst their most skilled players. He tuned out Dean - who had taken over as commentator -- the crowd, and

as much of the action as he could ignore without colliding with anything, and put his concentration into out-maneouvering his opposition. The results were closer than he would have liked, but in the end his broom and his slightly longer reach served him well; sweaty but triumphant, he closed his hand around the little fluttering ball and held it up for all to see. Victory!

His teammates piled around him in celebration; with this win they were still in the running for the Quidditch Cup, despite their loss to Slytherin earlier. They would just need to make sure their winning margin over Hufflepuff was large enough. In a flurry of laughter, party plans, and exuberant loop-the-loops, they settled to the ground, accepted the congratulations from their House, and trooped off en masse back to the castle to begin the festivities. Except for Harry.

When Dean and Seamus had heaved him onto their shoulders in jubilation, Harry had spotted Draco. Alone -- not in the rapidly-emptying stands, but standing by the far side of the pitch in neutral territory.

Harry wiggled out of his friends' grasp. "You go on without me; I'll be up in a minute," he told them.

They raised one dark and one sandy-blond eyebrow in response, then shrugged, grinning, their minds already back on the celebration. "Just don't be too long," Seamus told him. "Colin and Dennis' mum sent them a large box of Honeydukes sweets recently, and they were saving them for today. Besides, what's a party without the Seeker?"

Harry grinned back. "Save me some, would you? And I'm sure the party will go on just fine; our Chasers usually celebrate loudly enough for the whole House!" They all laughed. Then, after waving them off, he turned and threaded his way through the swiftly-thinning crowd, accepting the congratulations or dodging the glares of those he passed, until he finally reached the lone Slytherin. Draco stood silently at the edge of the pitch with his face tilted to the sky as if an invisible game was still going on.

"I wasn't sure whether you still came to the games," Harry said hesitantly, as he drew near.

The blond shrugged, swiveling his head in that not-quite-complete turn, as if seeking a compromise between having his eyes or his ears facing Harry. "I don't. But it was so noisy today, I could hear the shouting all the way inside the castle," he said. "Figured as long as I couldn't study, I might as well come out and hear the score properly."

Harry couldn't help smiling. He suspected Draco wasn't quite telling the full truth behind his nonchalant reasons for being there - it wasn't as if today's game had been any noisier than any other. But he wasn't sure he cared. The point was, Draco was there. He'd set foot on the pitch. And he'd seen - well, heard - Harry play.

"So, what did you think?"

Draco paused to consider. "It's a lot less interesting to just hear about it, rather than see it. Most of the time I had no idea what you or that Ravenclaw Seeker were up to until the very end, when you were scrambling for the Snitch. Thomas's description mostly focused on the other players." He shrugged again. "It was okay. Congratulations, by the way." He gave a small smile.

"Thanks," Harry responded, trying to think of a way for Draco to experience the parts he missed. "You didn't miss too much, really. You know how it is - you sit around twiddling your thumbs for most of the game, and then have five minutes of insane dodging, racing, and dive-bombing to beat the other Seeker."

Draco's expression dropped slightly. "Yes," he answered slowly. "I remember."

Harry bit his lip. He felt like he was doing this all wrong; he was trying to bring the experience to life, not make the Slytherin more wistful. He scanned the now-empty pitch, trying to think of something he could say or do to bring the thrill back. Then his eyes fell on the Firebolt still clutched in his grip. "Hey," he finally told the other boy, "why don't you come flying with me?"

Draco scowled. "That's not funny, Potter."

"No, I mean it. Look - you can sit behind me - my broom is strong enough. Then you can fly again. I bet you haven't been up since ... you know ... the accid-"

"No way." Draco cut him off with a shake of his head. "Potter, I can't."

But Harry was determined. There might be things Draco *couldn't* do anymore - like be a Seeker - but flying tandem was certainly possible. No more avoidance.

"Yes, you can," he told Draco, slapping his broom into position between them. "Here." He climbed on the broom, then twisted around and grabbed Draco's hand, steering it toward the handle behind him. "There's the broom. I'm in front, so you can just hold on to me. You don't have to worry about steering or anything."

He watched Draco reflexively close his fingers around the broom handle, and instinctively throw his leg over.

"Right, then," Harry said, grinning as he turned to face the front again. "Okay, here we go!" With that, he kicked against the ground, and they were off.

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As the broom lurched, Draco grabbed for the security of the body in front of him, keeping one hand clenched around the broom handle and the other tightly clamped around Harry's torso. How in hell had he let Harry talk him into this? Once he'd felt the broom in his hand, he had mounted automatically, without thinking -- but it was the last place he wanted to be.

It was true that he had missed flying. He'd been able to fly a broom as long as he could remember, and he had been especially peeved that Harry had won the house team position as a first-year, given that he *knew* his own skills were equally great. Whenever he'd needed a moment to himself, or had wanted to work off some frustration (usually because of Harry) he had gone flying. But since the accident, not only had he been grounded, he had tried to put flying out of his head entirely. It was useless to dwell on what he'd lost, and any memory of flight which *did* come to mind always ended with a sickening crunch and darkness. He'd avoided going to the pitch or attending Quidditch games, and left the room if he overheard anyone discussing anything remotely broom-related.

Yet something had drawn him down to the pitch this morning; he told himself it was just the noise in the castle, but in reality he'd wanted to know how Harry was doing. For all his inquisitiveness and other irritating habits, the Gryffindor had become a friend, someone increasingly important in Draco's life, despite his better judgment.

And speaking of going against his better judgment - here he was now on the back of Harry's broom, hanging on for dear life. He was discovering that being up in the air and unable to see was incredibly disorienting. On the ground he at least knew which way was up; here, he had no sensory cues at all, except what his confused and overworked inner ear could relay. It wasn't nearly enough. At the first turn Harry made, Draco's eyes automatically clenched shut; if he couldn't see, at least he could pretend that it was deliberate. Somehow it made it marginally easier to cope than to have wide eyes tearing up in the wind, uselessly trying to deliver information to his disoriented brain.

"You okay back there?" he heard Harry call above the wind.

"I've been better. Don't turn so much," he moaned, as he felt the broom shift again. "I might be sick."

He felt the broom level out, and his inner ear once again caught up. "Sorry about that," came the Gryffindor's voice. Draco was currently pressing the side of his face against the other boy's back; the vibrations rumbled against his cheek. "Is that better?"

"A little. Tell me if you plan to do anything else funny." His right arm tightened its grip around Harry's chest. He could feel the beating of the other boy's heart against his fingers; his own was thumping wildly in terror under his jumper. The fancier moves had not only made him dizzy, but also reminded him of his last wild chase; that episode had ended with him cracking his head. He had no idea where any obstacles were at all, no idea how high they were flying or anything at all about their position. But as the flight evened out and nothing much happened, he began to relax, fractionally.

"Malfoy, I have to turn around, I'm getting too close to the Forbidden Forest," Harry called again. "I'm going to make a turn to the right. You ready?"

"Yeah, I think so," Draco answered, bracing himself for more disorientation. But it never came.

With Harry's warning he found himself leaning properly into the turn, keeping mental tabs on which way "down" was. He couldn't really tell how big a turn it was yet, but when the broom straightened out, he sat up with it, and experienced only a brief moment of confusion as his balance worked itself out again. He opened his eyes.

Nothing.

It suddenly struck Draco just how much he was missing. Not only was it much harder to keep his balance with all directions open to movement, but there was an entire perspective he had blocked from his memory. And now he was remembering. No views of the treetops, or colourful tiny landscapes below him. No racing against the birds around the castle turrets or marveling at the sea of white after a snowfall.

He shut his eyes again. It made no difference to his brain, but, as before, it somehow was easier to get over the absence if he pretended it was just temporary, under his own control - lowered eyelids, not destroyed nerve cells.

Eyes closed, and with Harry calling any other directional shifts he was making, Draco began to pay more attention to the feel of flight. The *whoosh* of air rushing by was liberating; the feel of the broom underneath him comforting, even though the experience could not be complete. *This* was where he had always enjoyed being. In the air. And this time with Harry who, for all that Draco derided him for it, gave off a feeling of security - that damn 'hero' persona he always wore. He relaxed his panic hold on the other boy, but kept his arm around him for added balance, feeling his own heart match more closely the light beat under his hand; thrilling from flight, no longer pounding in terror. Harry was still wearing his Quidditch uniform - Draco recognised the texture of the team robes and the jumper - and he was still a bit sweaty after his race for the Snitch. Leaning in against the Gryffindor's warmth, breathing in the familiar scent of hard play, Draco began to feel more like himself again. After a few more turns, and some slightly fancier moves, he decided he was up for something more.

"Take it into a dive," he called.

He felt Harry twist back slightly as if trying to look at him. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Just let me know when you're going to do it."

"Okay." There was still some doubt in the voice, but Draco knew Harry loved the daredevil movements; there was no way he'd turn down the opportunity. Sure enough: "Hang on, let me get back over the pitch; I don't fancy diving toward the lake," the Gryffindor told him. A few minutes passed, during which Harry called out a few more directional shifts. Draco almost didn't need them now; he was totally focused on the feel of the broom underneath him, and the anticipatory clues Harry's shifting body made against his.

"All right," came the warning. "I'm going ... now!"

The bottom dropped out of Draco's stomach as he felt the broom tilt steeply forward and plunge for the ground. It was a bit unnerving not to know just how far he had until impact, but he almost didn't care; in the back of his mind was the unspoken terror that he was going to smash into something, but his trust in Harry's flying skills overcame that. He simply hung on, letting gravity press him completely against the body in front of him, enjoying a thrill he had refused to think about for four long months.

In what felt like no time at all, he felt the broom level out, and suddenly slow down. "I'm going to stop now," said Harry, no longer needing to shout now that they were out of the wind. "Might as well, since we're down here already."

Draco simply nodded, forgetting for the moment that Harry had his back to him and couldn't see him either; his ears were still full of the rush of wind, and he suddenly didn't trust his voice to speak. He opened his eyes and loosened his grip around the other boy as Harry dismounted, feeling suddenly cold at the lack of body contact. Then the Gryffindor was next to him, taking Draco's hand and putting it on his shoulder to give him an idea of how far off the ground the broom was, and he was dismounting -- shaking and overwhelmed and unsure whether he was about to laugh or cry.

"Thanks, Potter," he said, brushing his hair out of his eyes with a trembling hand.

"No problem," came the reply. "I know I kind of dragged you into it, but it seems like you coped pretty well. Would you like to do it again sometime?"

He did, but-

"I'm sure you have better things to do than take me flying," Draco answered with a shrug, as reality abruptly smothered the elation he had just felt. "And besides, you do enough for me."

"So? I'm offering. And you do plenty for me, too, you know. My marks have improved and I have a better chance of passing my N.E.W.Ts since I've been working with you."

He dismissed Harry's comparison. "It's not the same. It's not like you were ever doing that badly. But you do some things for me I *can't* do for myself, and I hate that-" He broke off and lowered his voice. "No offense, Potter. But I just can't ask you to do anything more."

"I repeat - I'm offering. It was fun for me - I haven't flown tandem like that before, except to take Hermione up once, and it was a lot more fun to go with you, someone who understands flying."

"Someone who tries to break your ribs, you mean," he retorted, remembering, rather shamefacedly, the way he'd clutched at Harry like a terrified child.

"That was just for a few minutes. It was my fault anyway, for not telling you what I was doing. You told me yourself, that time I walked you back, that you needed to know what was going on, and I forgot."

"But I shouldn't have to be *told!*" Draco's hands suddenly knotted into fists. "I was a good flyer, like you, and now look at me! I need help with *everything!*"

"That's not true, you-"

"It *is*," he insisted stubbornly. A part of his mind wondered why he was telling Harry all this, but it suddenly was bubbling out of him, unstoppable. "Even when I'm doing something by myself, some charm or device or *compensatory technique*," he sneered at the term, "is making it possible. All those things you do without thinking, I have to think about! Without help, I can't do *anything* anymore. Not writing, not walking, not flying." He shook his head as the memory of soaring came back to him, fresh and bright from that afternoon's adventure. "Especially not flying," he whispered. "I haven't even tried to be on a broom since the accident but I used to fly all the time and-" suddenly his throat closed up and he had to force the words out. "-And now I can't and-"

It was all too much. Being back up in the air, doing something he had loved so fiercely, had unlocked something deep inside of him, the sense of loss he had tried to stifle for so long. He fell to the ground as his hard-won composure unraveled entirely. *"Why?"* he cried, the sound dissolving into a sob. "I hate this! I want to see ... everything is so hard ... you have no idea what it's like...." His hands began ripping the grass out of the damp ground in his pain, and he could hardly breathe for the sobs which tore through his chest. "I'll never play again ... and I *hate* having to rely on people ... and you were right, I'm alone ... all alone...."

He had never felt more miserable in his whole life, not even when the doctors had given him their prognosis. He hadn't allowed it. He had simply swallowed the news and worked to get back to normal. Only it wasn't. It would never be normal again; for the rest of his life he would be dependent - on magic, on things, on people - instead of the proud, powerful person he had been raised to be.

Harry tried to say something once, but Draco cut him off, unable to stop crying, and unwilling to hear any words the other boy might have to say. Long moments passed, during which he raved about the unfairness of it all, finally spilling everything which he had suppressed: his sense of failure and his exhaustion and his anger.

Finally, however, as the tears dwindled, he felt Harry kneel down by his side and a warm hand touch his shoulder. "Shhh. C'mon, Draco," the Gryffindor murmured. "It'll be okay."

Draco lurched away from the offered comfort. "No! No it won't! I'm going to be like this forever, struggling forever!" He tried to push against Harry, to run off and escape in his misery and mortification, but the other boy held him fast.

"Draco, please!" Harry pleaded. "Please, just ... stay here and talk to me. There's no one here. No one but us, and I promise I won't tell anyone." There was a pause. "Look, I ... you're right, I *don't* know what it's like. But you don't have to keep it all inside. Tell me more about what it's like. Maybe ... maybe that would help a little?"

He shook his head, rooting around in his pocket for his handkerchief. "It's not going to fix anything. I could talk 'til Longbottom got a potion right, and I still wouldn't be able to-" He wiped his nose and took a deep breath, trying to pull himself together. "Look, it wouldn't change anything."

There was another pause. Draco wished he could see what the other boy was doing; he got the impression Harry was thinking. His hand was still resting comfortably on Draco's shoulder, and Draco noticed absently that Harry must have removed his gloves at some point. Yet another thing he hadn't been able to see.

"It won't get you your eyesight back, that's true," the Gryffindor finally said. "But - I also know from experience that it's a million times harder to do something alone than with friends. When Ron was angry at me during the Tri-Wizard Tournament ... well ... I'll just say it was a lot harder to face the First Task than the others, when we'd made up. Just to feel like people understand you, or that you can complain to *someone* when you feel like life can't get any worse.... Look, like I said before, you *have* people around you. If you don't want to talk to me, maybe you could talk to one of your housemates."

Draco gave a short mirthless laugh. "Are you joking? As I said before, we're Slytherins. I don't think anyone has ever confided anything really personal to anyone else in the whole time I've been there - except maybe gossip about who's sleeping with whom."

"How about your parents?"

Another snort. "My father has all but abandoned me, now that I'm no longer fit to be a Death Eater. I think he's grooming another boy to take my place -- some fourth-year whose parents went to Azkaban."

"I should have known you were going to be a Death Eater," Harry mumbled. Then, with curiosity, "What about your mother?"

"My mother became a complete worrywart." Draco made a face. "Why do you think I'm the way I am? It's because of them. I push myself to prove to my father that I don't need him to succeed, and to stop my mother from having vapours or whatever the hell they call it."

Harry chuckled. "I'm sorry but - 'vapours'? Do people still talk like that?"

"Some do," Draco answered with a shrug. He was suddenly very tired.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then Harry abruptly blurted out, "I'm sorry."

He turned toward the other boy's voice. "For what?" he asked, wishing for the millionth time that he could really see him, and not just have to take a guess at his expression and body language based on his voice.

"For taking you flying. You said no, and I made you do it anyway. I thought it would be fun - give you something back, you know?" There was defeat in his voice. "I didn't mean to make you think about all the bad stuff."

"You didn't do anything," Draco answered tiredly, "so you can stop feeling guilty. I'm just messed up; it's not your fault. I just get sick of the limitations - I mean, I can't even see *you*, and you're sitting right there." He hauled himself to his feet. "And now that I've made a complete fool of myself, I think I'm going to go back to my room and try not to think too much."

"Wait." He heard Harry scramble to his feet. "You *can*."

He turned. "I can what?"

"You can see me. Remember?" He felt the other boy grasp his right hand and bring it up to his face. "Like this."

Draco froze, his hand against Harry's cheek. There it was again, that solid, *real*, achingly familiar face. How many times since that first time had he wanted to 'see' Harry again, instead of just relying on memory? Lots. But that had been something to do just the once, hadn't it? Just to prove he knew what Harry's expression was at that moment. You couldn't just go "So, what did you think about the latest DADA assignment and, by the way, can I touch you again so I can see what you look like right now?"

But here Harry was, offering him the chance to see him. Again. Draco's fingers tentatively skimmed the line of Harry's jaw, down to the somewhat narrow chin. He felt and heard Harry reach up and remove his glasses, the armpieces clicking as he folded them. Then, with that added permission, Draco suddenly felt free to embrace the opportunity he'd been handed; his hands roamed over the Gryffindor's full face, over his eyebrows and through a bit of his unruly fringe, sliding down the scar and then down his nose. Brushing the tips of lashes which he remembered were black, and across the windchapped lips. The mouth was calm and serious now, but he remembered seeing it laugh and frown, fall open in surprise and tighten in determination. All of it - hair, jaw, nose, mouth, scar -- fit the memory of Harry he carried around with him, bringing the images back to full focus in his mind, alive under his fingertips.

"Could I try?" Harry whispered.

Startled, Draco pulled his hands back. "Try what?"

"Could I - touch you? See you with my hands, the way you see me?"

"But you can *already* see me."

"It's not the same. You said I couldn't know what it was like for you. Well... I want to try. Would that be all right?"

Draco hesitated, then relented. "All right," he whispered. "Close your eyes."

He assumed Harry had done so, because the next thing he felt was a set of fingers tentatively brushing the side of his neck, as if not sure where they were going. Draco held himself perfectly still as the other boy oriented himself, feeling Harry's hands skim over his own features and following a path similar to his own explorations. Up over Draco's forehead and across his eyebrows, tracing the outline of his nose, and the groove above his lip. A colder path appeared where Harry's fingers smudged a few leftover tears off his cheeks. He had a light touch, but it drove down deep into Draco's gut, as if Harry was caressing his soul as well as his eyelids. Was this what it was like for Harry too?

"Your lips are chapped," the Gryffindor murmured eventually, one finger brushing over his mouth.

"Yours too," Draco smiled, trying not to trap Harry's finger as he spoke. "All that flying."

"Yeah, probably...." The hand moved back to his cheek and then paused there, palm cupping the side of his face. Then it withdrew.

The silence stretched around them, and Draco wasn't sure whether he wanted to break it or not. It was a moment where nothing else existed, no burdens, no people. Just them.

"I guess ... I guess we should get going," Harry muttered after a while. "It's getting cold."

Draco was suddenly aware of the chill; he wondered if it had turned cloudy, as it had been warmer earlier. "Yes, I guess so."

He heard the slight click of Harry's glasses being unfolded and presumably placed back on his face. He tried not to be envious that the other boy had use of his eyes again. "So, did you learn anything?" he asked as they began to walk back to the castle.

"Um... your nose goes slightly to the right."

The unexpected response brought forth an equally unexpected chuckle. "Fine, fine, point out my flaws."

"It's not a flaw," Harry insisted. "I just never noticed it before."

They walked back companionably, parting at the empty entrance hall.

"See you Monday, I suppose." They studied separately on Sundays.

"Sure," Draco replied. He suddenly felt like he might sleep until Monday, he was that tired after the afternoon's events. "Look, Potter, about today.... Can we just forget it ever happened?"

"If you want," Harry answered slowly. "But - well, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm sort of glad it did. You obviously have a lot on your mind."

Draco shook his head ruefully. He still wished fervently that he hadn't fallen apart like that. "I suppose," he muttered. He headed off for the Slytherin dungeons, but then turned back toward the sound of Harry's footsteps. "Hey, Potter?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks." *For the flight, for listening, for letting me see you.*

"Anytime."

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Chapter: 7

P>**[Chapter 6]**
Thoughts

The thoughts of the day become the dreams of the night.
-- Chinese proverb

Harry watched Draco follow his little guiding orb down the stairwell to the dungeons, then climbed his own stairs up to Gryffindor Tower. Fortunately for him, the stairs decided to stay in their normal position; he was too busy thinking about what he had witnessed to pay any attention to where he was going. Instead, he let his feet carry him up automatically until he reached the familiar portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Password?"

"Frumious bandersnatch."

The portrait swung open, and he was nearly knocked over by the wall of noise and light which greeted him. *The party.* He'd completely forgotten. Harry looked down and was somewhat surprised to realise he was still in his Quidditch uniform; the game had seemed so long ago....

"Harry, where've you been?" Ron ran up to him as he climbed through the portrait hole. "The party's been going on for ages!"

"Wha--? Oh, I ... um ... I had an emergency to take care of."

Red eyebrows furrowed with concern. "An emergency? Are you okay?"

Harry unbuckled his armguards. "Yes, yes, I'm fine. I just had to do something, and it took longer than I thought. I'm sorry." He smiled brightly. "But I'm here now. Just give me a minute to get out of this gear, all right?"

"Oh, right." Ron scanned him up and down, frowning slightly. "Yeah, you'd best go change. Are you sure you're all right? You seem preoccupied."

Harry waved him off. "I'm fine. Back in a minute." He climbed the dormitory stairs to his room, with Ron's shouts of "Hey everyone - Harry's finally here!" and the answering cheers echoing back down in the common room. He dropped off his broom and changed as quickly as he could, then went to the bathroom to splash some water on his face. But at the sight of his reflection in the mirror, he paused, studying his features closely. What did Draco see when he touched Harry? Eyes closed, he ran wet hands over his face, remembering the touch of the other boy. The water on his hands reminded him of how he had brushed a few leftover tears off Draco's cheeks, and subsequently of the complete breakdown he had witnessed.

A loud roar of laughter boiled up from the common room, interrupting his reverie. *Right. The party.* Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Harry dried his hands and face, ran a hurried comb through his hair, and sped back downstairs.

The minute he reappeared in the common room, he was surrounded. "Great game, Harry!" "Harry, we saved you some of Mum's sweets!" "Harry, we were just going over the highlights; tell us about when you did that corkscrew twist there at the end." Someone tossed him a contraband bottle of Butterbeer, and someone else pressed more food into his hands. Although the party had already been going on for some time, having their missing player back seemed to re-energise the Gryffindors; he found himself dragged from one group to another, discussing the game, dodging Filibuster Fireworks, and enduring rather giggly admiration from a group of third-year girls.

His mind wasn't on the festivities at all, however, and he was finding it nearly impossible to engage in any sort of coherent conversation, with all the thoughts tumbling through his mind. After shaking off the girls, he slipped off to a chair and sat down, taking a long drink from his Butterbeer. He watched his housemates talk and laugh, the very picture of merriment, and thought instead about a boy who had cried in despair.

He had suspected Draco had been suppressing his emotions, but he had not anticipated just how vehement the other boy would be when he finally cracked. It had been a moment of complete vulnerability, a side of Draco he doubted anyone had ever seen - or would likely see again. Although he supposed he had inadvertently caused the dam to break by taking him flying, Harry was still stunned that he'd been there to witness it; and if he was honest with himself, he was also rather pleased that the Slytherin had talked to him about his feelings, even a little.

The whole thing had taken Harry utterly by surprise. Draco had been cross at him before, like the time they had argued by the lake, but he had still maintained his composure. This time he had broken down completely, and at first Harry hadn't known what to say or do. If it had been Hermione, he would have gathered her into a hug; with Ron, he would have immediately put a hand on his arm. But Draco was different; he still gave off a fierce aura of pride, a protective barrier which didn't invite touch even under emotional extremes. And given that he clearly had a lot to let out, it had seemed better to just let him go at first, and approach him afterward.

"Hey, Harry, look! I just finished developing my pictures from the game." Colin Creevey stood at Harry's elbow, a stack of photographs in his hand.

Harry, who had been staring into the fire, lost in thought, jumped at the sound of the younger boy's voice. "Hmmm? Oh, that's great, Colin," he said absently. With an effort, he focused his attention on the photos. "Let's see them, shall we?"

Beaming, Colin handed the pictures over. The camera enthusiast had finally mastered the complicated wizarding photo process in his third year, and had wormed his way into being the official team photographer the year after that. "I think this one is best," he bubbled, fishing one out of the stack and laying it on top. It was a close-up shot, courtesy of Colin's zoom lens, of Harry at the end of the game. He watched as his photographic self frowned in concentration, then opened up into a grin of triumph as he captured the Snitch.

"Very nice," he murmured, hastily flipping through the remaining pictures. He was less interested in close-ups of the zooming players than in the larger crowd shots; perhaps one might indicate at which point Draco had arrived at the game. Unfortunately, none of Colin's wide-angle shots were pointed in the right direction. Hiding his disappointment, Harry plastered a smile on his face and praised the younger boy, then watched him dart back through the crowds to share his treasures with other team members.

He thought about the close-up shot of himself after Colin had gone, particularly the different facial expressions displayed on the photograph. He remembered how Draco had first touched him to prove he could tell what expression Harry wore. It had been purely an academic exercise, but the effect on Harry had been arresting. The second time ... today ... that had been something else entirely. And even though Harry himself had initiated it, placing Draco's hand on his cheek, he'd still felt his breath catch at the touch.

But nothing had prepared him for the way it would feel to touch Draco himself. Eyes closed, tracing around the other boy's features, it had been an astonishingly intimate experience. He'd discovered things about a face he thought he'd known so well; a face he'd snarled into as a youngster, and studied up close over books and quills in the past few months. His eyes told him that Draco's skin was pale, that his mouth could be coaxed into something other than a sneer, and that the grey eyes were still striking, despite their emptiness. But his fingers told him about the slight bend in his nose, and how fine his eyelashes were, and how warm and alive he still was beneath the reserved exterior. The composite effect was intense, somehow more personal than

the emotional breakdown Harry had witnessed. When Harry had laid his hand on Draco's cheek, he had fought a sudden urge to lean in and kiss the other boy; it had seemed like such a natural thing to do.

He shook his head, chastising himself. He'd had his eyes closed - he could have been touching anyone. Any girl, any boy. There was no reason to think there was anything in that sudden desire. Surely if his eyes had been open, if he'd seen who he was touching, he would not have thought any such thing.

Harry had thought about kissing and sex and related activities before; he was a normal teenage boy in that regard. But it had mostly been in the context of laughing, teasing moments with his (mostly male) friends, listening to their exploits, or ribbing them about future ones. He had kissed a few girls here and there, but had never felt a terribly strong urge to go much further himself. A late bloomer, he supposed, mentally shrugging. Somehow, the realities of life always seemed to take greater priority over any romantic relationships. He'd admired a few girls over the years, and once even a boy - a Ravenclaw Keeper named Benjamin who had finished school the previous year. Harry, however, had chalked that up to admiration for the way the other boy played, and had never thought much of it.

What he'd felt with Draco earlier had been something else entirely. But still, it didn't *really* mean he wanted to kiss Draco, did it? Perhaps his body was just confused by the way the Slytherin had pressed so closely against him during the flight....

"Harry, are you all right?"

"Hmmm?" He looked up into Hermione's concerned face, then glanced around. The party was finally fizzling out, and many students had re-emerged with their books, leaving only a few die-hards off in the corner to chatter about the team's win. He saw Ron heading their way as he unwrapped one of the last remaining Chocolate Frogs.

"You keep rubbing your mouth - are your lips bothering you?" she asked. "I have a pot of that balm Madam Pomfrey gave me, if you've got windburn."

Harry hastily pulled his fingers away from his lips, where he had, evidently, been tracing them without realizing it. "No, I'm fine, Hermione. I was just thinking."

"You sure?"

He laughed lightly. "You sound like Ron. Yes, I'm sure."

"Who sounds like Ron?" Ron asked.

"Apparently I do," Hermione responded. "Were you asking him if he was all right earlier?"

Ron shrugged. "He seemed a bit preoccupied, that's all." He glanced at Harry. "Something the

matter, mate? You haven't talked much lately."

"I'm *fine.* Really. I just have a few things on my mind, nothing worth worrying about." Harry stretched. "But I'm also knackered. I think I might go to bed early."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "What about dinner?"

"You know we almost never get down to dinner after a victory - too much food at the party," Ron replied. Hermione, eyeing the crushed Frog wrapper in his hand, grudgingly agreed.

"And anyway," Harry added, "if I wake up later and want something, I can always sneak downstairs and ask the house-elves."

"They need sleep, too," Hermione sniffed automatically; then she rolled her eyes. "Yes, I know. 'But they *like* serving us.'" Her tone mimicked what he and Ron had tried to point out so many times over the years. "Fine, go off, then. You do look a bit tired." She peered at him again with concern. "And you're sure you're all right?"

"Yes," he replied firmly. "It's just been a long day. I'll see you in the morning, okay?" And with a smile to reassure his friends, Harry hauled himself out of his chair and went upstairs to his room. It wasn't a lie - he really was tired. All the emotional ups and downs of the day - first the victory over Ravenclaw and flying tandem with Draco, then watching helplessly as the Slytherin fell apart and, finally, the reciprocal touching - had left him drained.

He went back upstairs and wearily pulled out his pyjamas, preparing for bed. But then, in the midst of untying his shoes, he paused. *"You don't know what it's like,"* came the echo of Draco's voice in his mind. And it was true - he had no idea what it was like to be blind. Even though Harry couldn't function *well* without his glasses, he could at least still see fuzzy shapes and could generally tell what was going on around him. He pulled off his shoes and looked at them. How hard would it be, really, to do the simple task of getting undressed and into bed without sight?

On impulse, he decided to try it, squeezing his eyes shut. Ironically, the first order of business was to remove his glasses so they wouldn't get caught while he changed his clothes. Pulling them off was easy enough, but he had to fumble around to find his bedside table in order to set them down properly. Then ... where were his pyjamas? He had just had them a minute ago - he'd set them down on the bed, hadn't he? While fumbling around on the bedcovers in search of his pyjamas, he banged his shin on the bedframe. *Ow!*

Harry's eyes snapped open in reaction to the pain. And, blurred vision or not, he immediately spotted his pyjamas draped over the foot of the bed where he'd left them, a lighter blur against the crimson duvet - and only about a foot from where he'd been searching. With a sigh, he finished his bedtime routine as usual, eyes open. He was really too tired to try anything else, but even the brief lesson had ... well ... opened his eyes. His admiration for Draco increased even more.

That's all it was, right? Admiration.

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Draco slept for most of that afternoon, exhausted after his emotional day. He woke around dinnertime, and first considered sending a message off to a house-elf to bring him some food. Warmth crept up his cheeks at the thought of what he'd said to Harry and how undignified he must have looked, and he just wasn't sure he could face the other boy again so soon. Even though they sat on opposite sides of the Great Hall, they would still be in the same room and, unless Harry had changed his habits in the past four months, the Gryffindor always sat facing him. Then he remembered the game, and knew that the winning team rarely showed up to that day's dinner, as they were too busy celebrating. Slytherin parties often ran far into the night, or at least until Snape came to glare at them.

Deciding to risk it, Draco wearily got to his feet and straightened his hair and clothing with coaching from his reflection, biting his lip as he remembered his outburst earlier. *"I need help with everything!"* But then, as his hands reassured him that every hair was neatly in place, he suddenly chuckled - a bit wearily - comparing the feel of his own fine hair to Harry's wild strands. At least *he* could make himself look presentable. With Harry's unruly mop, nothing his reflection could say would help.

Marginally cheered by the image, Draco went down to dinner and took his normal place at the end of the table. Pansy directed him to the evening's beef stew, hot rolls and butter, and he ate in silence, as usual. The talk this evening was, unsurprisingly, about the game, and more particularly about the Ravenclaws, as Slytherin played them next. Draco's first inclination was to finish his stew and leave as quickly as possible; he was drained, and listening to Quidditch talk when he could no longer play was still very difficult. But then he heard Harry's name mentioned with typical Slytherin disdain, and suddenly found himself more willing to stay.

"We should be able to win easily. Even Potter could out-loop her."

Draco's ears perked up as his tablemates rehashed snippets of the game, somehow making it all much more vivid than Dean Thomas' announcements had been; perhaps it was because they now had the leisure to dissect all the action, rather than trying to capture the main points as they happened. Ignoring the persistent ache of loss, he listened as Harry's name cropped up several times, imagining the Gryffindor whizzing through the air as he had done with Draco later on. He remembered the feel of Harry under his hand, sweaty and caught up in the thrill of flight, remembered the warmth of his body, and the way they fitted together. It was as if they had been one person flying and, combined with the description of the game his housemates were providing, it was almost like he *had* been playing Quidditch after all.

"Is Potter here?" he asked suddenly, interrupting a scathing criticism of the Ravenclaw Chasers.

There was a pause at the table. Draco cursed himself for not thinking; he hadn't initiated more than ten words to anyone since his return, and now they were all probably looking at him, not

only for speaking, but for asking such an odd question.

"Er ... no," someone said - Malcolm Baddock, by the sound of his voice. "There's hardly anyone at their table. Probably all off having a victory tea party or something." There were various snorts around the table. "Why?"

"Just curious," he shrugged, trying to sound dismissive. Why *did* he care, anyway? Only half an hour ago he'd been trying to avoid Harry. It wasn't like he was going to suddenly walk up to him and ... what? Touch him again? Fly tandem again? He obviously needed to go back to sleep so he could think straight.

"Wanting to remind Potter that you beat him last time?" Blaise spoke this time. "That'd keep him from getting too cocky." More laughter around the table.

"Something like that," Draco murmured, still feeling awkward at talking to people so casually after all this time. Well, he *was* remembering the last time he'd flown - only it had been *with* Harry, not against him.

The conversation resumed again without him after that, and he listened to their chatter awhile longer before going back to his room. Although it was still early, Draco was exhausted enough that he decided to skip any studying he might have done; instead, he got out his pyjamas, went through his nightly rituals without incident, and climbed back into bed. He thought he would fall asleep immediately, but in the stillness of his room, he found he had nothing to distract himself from the overwhelming emotions of the day. His bed suddenly felt very cold and empty, and for a moment his loneliness and misery threatened to engulf him once more. But then he swallowed and remembered the way Harry had let him 'see' him again. The way it had felt to have Harry touch *him* in return.

He was still embarrassed at breaking down in front of the other boy. He would have preferred to fall apart in private; he would have preferred not to fall apart at all. Yet, for all his protests that he hated depending on people, and despite his embarrassment, Draco had to admit ... he was glad Harry was in his life. There was a warmth to the Gryffindor, an intimacy that bled through his skin, as if he gave completely of himself all the time. Draco found himself responding to that warmth, wanting more, despite his fears.

Arm wrapped around his pillow, he dreamed of flying.

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Sunday passed normally enough for Harry. He went to breakfast with Hermione and Ron, then settled down for some homework with them, at Hermione's insistence. Although he was still thinking of the extraordinary events of the preceding day, he managed to work with Ron on their Tarot assignment for Divination without too much trouble.

"Okay, the Six of Swords," Harry said, pointing to the card in Ron's reading, "indicates special

knowledge." He consulted his book again. "'When unseen patterns become visible, you will realize with surprise that they were active all along. You have to first reorganize your mind in order to clearly see factors you usually take for granted.' Apparently if you look into yourself and study the situation, you'll know what to do, and you already have the means to do it."

Ron groaned. "This is supposed to help me figure out what to do after leaving school? 'Looking into yourself' is about as easy as 'relaxing your Inner Eye' and all that other crap Professor Trelawney feeds us." He sighed, watching as the figure on the card danced around with his weapon. "Well, if I supposedly already have the means to do whatever this is, I think we can safely rule out Divination as a career."

"Yeah, that's probably a safe bet," Harry laughed as he cleared Ron's cards away. "Hmm... you're good at facing off against bullies and such - remember when you were prepared to 'save' me from Sirius?" he mused. "And you seem to love hopeless causes - like the Chudley Cannons. And me." Ron's initial defence of the Cannons turned into a laugh at the self-deprecating remark. "Maybe you should go into DADA, like Lupin," Harry finished.

"I dunno," the red-haired boy shrugged, "isn't that more your thing?"

Harry made a face. "I seem to do enough of it whether I want to or not. I think I'd rather not have it as a daily career." Ron handed him the deck and he started shuffling.

"Don't forget to have your question in mind," Ron prompted.

"Erm ... right. Just thinking about the upcoming stuff..." he trailed off vaguely. He wasn't really sure how to put it, but the situation with Draco was on his mind; he supposed he just wanted a better sense of what was going on, and how to deal with it.

He cut the cards as Professor Trelawney had instructed; Ron dealt them out and began to help Harry translate his reading.

"...now, in the Situation position," he said, midway through, "you've got 'Death'."

"Trelawney will *love* that," Harry retorted, rolling his eyes. They both flipped through their books, *It's In the Cards: Translating the Tarot*, in search of that particular incarnation.

"Huh. You may actually get to disappoint the old bat after all," Ron told him after a moment. "It doesn't seem to have anything to do with death at all."

Harry ran his finger down the page, reading aloud. "'Let go and make the adjustments required for dealing with a new set of circumstances. The Death card in this position implies that a force of nature or a change in authority may be forcing you to change your accustomed way of doing things.'"

Ron grinned. "See? Unless 'change your way of doing things' means 'you can't do anything at all

because you're dead', you don't have anything to worry about." The boys laughed again, then went on to attempt interpretations for the rest of the cards.

"So, uh ... change, patience and responsibility, and something which seems to mean both happiness and the need to keep working in pursuit of happiness," Harry said looking over the results. "God only knows how I'm going to put all this together into some sort of sensible report."

"Yeah. How about mine? Scapegoat, teamwork, and 'it's already inside you' and some other rubbish. Makes about as much sense as that tyromancy rubbish we had to learn last term. I couldn't look at a piece of cheese for weeks after that. Ugh." He was pulling out a pack of Exploding Snap cards as he spoke. "Fancy a quick game before we move on? We haven't had a chance in ages."

"Boys!" Hermione interjected, looking up from her mountain of work. "You're supposed to be working."

"We *are* working," Ron claimed, all innocence. "Just taking a bit of a break. You know - to clear our Inner Eye before we write up our reports." Hermione rolled her eyes. "And besides," he went on, "we can always tell Professor Trelawney that we worked with the cards all afternoon. We just won't say *which* cards."

"Oh, all right," she sighed. "But it had better be only one or two games. I'm still going to check your work tonight before you hand it in, so I hope you're planning on finishing by dinner. I want to go over some practice Herbology N.E.W.T. questions tonight as well."

Ron frowned. "But I was going to see Mandy after dinner!"

"Ron Weasley, your girlfriend may be a Ravenclaw, but I don't believe for one minute that you were planning on studying with her tonight," Hermione glared sternly. "And you *know* the N.E.W.T.s are coming up - we have to prepare!"

With a sigh, Ron gave in, dealing the Exploding Snap cards with a bit less enthusiasm than he'd expressed a few minutes earlier.

"Cheer up," Harry told his friend as they began to play. "At least you'll see her at dinner."

He was rather looking forward to dinner himself. His last glimpse of Draco at lunchtime suddenly seemed ages ago.

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Draco spent his day in his usual library room, working on his Arithmancy homework, and doing some preliminary revision of his more difficult subjects. The room was lonely without Harry, and he found he still had half an ear out for the Gryffindor's footsteps, even though he knew the other boy would be in his own common room that day. He threw himself into his work as a distraction,

finally surfacing when his stomach began to grumble.

"Tempus," he muttered, pointing his wand at his watch.

"Eighteen-fifty." He had charmed his timepieces to use the twenty-four hour clock, as he could not use the presence or absence of daylight to separate nine a.m. from nine p.m.

Time for dinner - and a chance to finally take a break. With a yawn, he pushed back his chair and stretched, wincing at his sore muscles. Yesterday's flight had awoken aches in his back, legs, and abdomen -- muscles he hadn't used since the accident. It actually felt rather good. Maybe he *would* ask Harry to take him up again sometime. Maybe.

On his way down to the Great Hall, he thought about dinner the previous night. Although he hadn't intended to speak up, his remarks had been met with neither scorn nor pity; rather, except for the initial pause, his nearest tablemates had responded fairly normally. Maybe Harry had been right; perhaps he *had* isolated himself unnecessarily. He might not be sought out as a powerful leader anymore, but even the lesser Slytherins had *some* companions. He had not been comfortable enough to talk at either breakfast or lunch that day but, spurred by his increased loneliness at being without Harry, he thought perhaps he might try again today.

He sat at his customary spot on the end, eating his chicken and ham pie, and listened. This time, however, he listened with an ear for participation, rather than as an outsider, the way he had all those months when he had shut himself away entirely.

"Hogsmeade visit next weekend," piped a boy a few seats down. "Who's going?" Draco couldn't immediately place the voice; one of the younger students, probably. But it was news to him; unable to see the Hogsmeade notice and without someone to tell him there *was* a notice, this was the first he'd known about it.

There was a chorus of voices, indicating their plans for the weekend getaway.

"Not me," grumbled Blaise beside Draco. "Bloody N.E.W.T.s. Have to start revising."

"Oh, come on, Blaise," Pansy coaxed from across the table. "Surely you can spare one day?"

Draco supposed Blaise must have shaken his head, because he went on without a verbal denial. "Blew off too many weekends this term already. Father says he can get me in at a good job if I prove myself with my grades - a place where I can earn a pile of Galleons and move up quickly, he says. So," Blaise sighed, "I have to study. There's quite a bit of material I haven't really understood this term."

"How about you boys?" Pansy asked.

Which 'boys' she was speaking to became immediately clear. "Dunno," came Crabbe's slow drawl. "Might need more Acid Pops. You, Goyle?"

"Yeah. Ran outta Cockroach Clusters ages ago. An' there'll be girls down at the pub too." Draco could practically hear him leer. He pitied whatever girls might be on the receiving end of Goyle's clumsy hands. As tarty as they were, they didn't deserve *that*.

"What about you, Pansy?" Draco ventured, tentatively. "Are you going?"

"Oh, I don't know," she replied. "Maybe I'll go for a bit, but we've been there so many times over the past four years, it's getting rather boring, don't you think?"

Draco shrugged in what he hoped was a noncommittal way. Yes, perhaps he'd seen everything already, but he also couldn't really anticipate finding much to do now that he couldn't see at all. "I'll probably just study too," he said, wondering if Harry would stay behind or go off with his other friends.

"Hmmm..." Pansy replied. "I wasn't planning on doing much revising yet. Hey Blaise," she joked. "Does your father have any other good jobs to offer? I want a position like that too, so I can show up my big sister."

"Sorry, Pans, you're on your own. As if I'd let you compete for my job anyway," Blaise snorted. "We'd probably kill each other."

"God, what a bunch of losers we've all become," interrupted Millicent in her distinctive nasal whine. "Time was, we'd all show that town who ruled the school, shake 'em up a bit. And now look. Bookworms and sweet-eaters."

"And girls," rumbled Goyle.

"Whatever," Millicent retorted, dismissively. "Look over there. I bet even those goody-goody Gryffindors have more fun than we do now. See, even Perfect Potter and his little cronies are laughing, while we're just talking about school and work. Pathetic."

Draco bit his lip in his sudden urge to defend Harry. Not the best way to ease his way back into the Slytherin social atmosphere. Still, Millicent's remark did warm him inside; he knew for sure that Harry was there, in the room with him. And even though they weren't at the same table, he suspected Harry was facing him, given his prior habits and the fact that Millicent could readily tell what he was doing.

While his housemates began to squabble over house pride versus post-school ambitions, Draco went back to his meal, and smiled.

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Chapter: 8

P>**[Chapter 7]**
De Nile

But love is blind, and lovers cannot see
The pretty follies that themselves commit.
-- Shakespeare (The Merchant of Venice)

"Transforma furca."

Harry watched as Draco worked to transfigure the sock into a fork. They were practising their "unrelated transfigurations" - changing an item into something completely different in shape and purpose.

"Hmmm," Draco muttered, feeling over the resultant object with his fingers. "It seems okay. Definitely metal this time, with sharp prongs. What am I missing?" The Slytherin always insisted on determining for himself if the transfiguration had been complete, but acknowledged a working pair of eyes covered all the bases.

"Well, it's not a knit fork, like the previous one was. But it's still argyle print," Harry grinned.

"Damn." Draco reversed the spell with a wave of his wand, and prepared to try again.

Harry leaned back in his chair as the other boy practised his task. It had been a good study session so far. He was glad to get back to his routine with Draco, after being separated. Strange how it had become more normal to study with the Slytherin than with his own housemates.

His eyes drifted to Draco's face; the eyes were relatively neutral, as usual, but his mouth was screwed up in concentration. Harry remembered the previous night, when he had seen a smile on that face instead. He'd been in the middle of explaining to a very confused Neville just how television worked, laughing over how his mistaken notions had come from a Muggle children's book, when, in one of his routine glances up at the Slytherin table, he'd noticed the smile. Draco didn't smile often - or at least, not in a relaxed, genuine fashion like that. He would often tease Harry with smirks, and there was occasional laughter, but any ordinary smiles often carried a hint of bitterness behind them. This was a completely relaxed smile, and it had warmed Harry right across the Great Hall.

It had also unsettled him again. He wasn't emotionally wound on Sunday the way he had been on Saturday, but that smile had affected him just the same. Maybe it was just the rarity of seeing such a thing? He was certainly glad Draco was feeling better, and that he had something to smile about, whatever it was.

"There." Draco's voice broke into his reverie. "This feels a bit weightier somehow. Does that mean the colour is correct, too?"

Harry leaned in and took the fork from Draco's slim fingers. "Yes, completely metal," he said, turning it over in his hands. "Not a trace of argyle, tweed, or anything of the sort."

"Finally!" Draco groaned. "Damn, this subject got so much harder after the accident. I was about to resign myself to eating with patterned forks, and somehow convincing McGonagall that I knew it was like that, and that I wanted it that way."

Harry laughed as he turned to look at the other boy. And then paused. After cursing and struggling with this task, the self-satisfied achievement on the Slytherin's face was a bright contrast. Instead of a scowl, his lips curled into a light smile, with a touch of smirk for his joke.

Leaning so close to Draco, Harry had a suddenly overwhelming urge to reach out and touch him again, congratulate him on his accomplishment, and hot on the heels of that thought came the desire to kiss him as well. He sat back abruptly, the chair skidding a few inches across the stone. *Okayyy....* He wasn't sure what was going on, but distance suddenly seemed like a good idea.

Draco's head turned at the noise. "You going somewhere?"

"What? No, I just ... er ... lost my balance for a minute," Harry answered, still flustered. "So ... um ... what shall we work on next?"

"I thought we could work on memorising the ingredients and instructions for the list of potions Professor Snape gave us." Increasingly, the students were required to work from memory; Draco had been teaching Harry some of the mnemonic skills he'd been using, which the Slytherin had used to limit the number of times something had to be read to him.

They began to discuss the various potions on the list, taking turns going back and forth with what they could recall. But Harry was only half paying attention. As Draco talked, Harry found his eyes were drawn back to the other boy's mouth, no matter how he tried to curtail it. He was suddenly glad Draco couldn't see him staring.

He thought about how close they were here at the table, in this little side room where no one ever came. He thought of talking and studying and brushing the Slytherin's hand with his own. Of just reaching over, casually, and kissing Draco as he talked, seeing what those lips felt like on his own lips, instead of on his fingers. He imagined pulling the other boy close, running a hand through the silver-blond hair, or maybe over his skin.

The images in his mind became bolder, brighter, so real he found it hard to believe he *wasn't* actually leaning over to kiss Draco. And he was perilously close to doing just that. His inhibitions no longer seemed to be functioning, and he was having trouble remembering that the other boy would likely be shocked, disgusted, and God only knew what it would do to their friendship. Inhaling sharply, Harry dug his nails into his palms and closed his eyes, trying to get

a grip on reality.

"Are you okay?"

Harry's eyes snapped open. Draco had turned toward him, and was frowning slightly.

"Yes, I-I'm fine. Why?" he swallowed, his eyes once again glued to the other boy's face. *That mouth.*

"You've been talking strangely for the past few minutes, and you didn't answer my last question at all."

He tried to clamp down on the confusing riot in his mind. "I'm sorry, what?"

"About the poison-detection potion - I couldn't remember if the marrantill was supposed to be added as an infusion or a decoction."

"Infusion," Harry choked out. He wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to hold off before he did something of his own accord. What was wrong with him? He hadn't been interested in anyone all year. And definitely never in a boy, unless you counted the Ravenclaw Keeper, and that wasn't anything near as intense as this was. He'd been spending too much time with Draco. Yes, that must be it. Too much time - he'd become confused. He needed to get away, he thought frantically -- put some space between them until he could remember how to be close to someone without being inappropriately attracted to them.

"I'm sorry," he said abruptly, interrupting Draco's recitation of the potion's storage and use. He pushed back his chair, deliberately this time, and began blindly stuffing his belongings back in his bag. "I forgot ... I have to go."

"Now?" Draco asked, looking confused. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing ... I'm fine! I just ... it's ... I just have to go." Harry was nearly panicking by now. "I'll talk to you later, okay?" And with that, he grabbed his bag, and fled out the door.

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He went straight to the sanctuary of the Gryffindor common room, where it appeared Hermione was drilling Ron in Herbology.

"Harry! What are you doing back so early?" she asked, looking up from her book as he stumbled through the portrait hole.

"I-" Harry suddenly found that no words were coming to mind. Not the truth, not excuses. It was as if his brain had stopped functioning altogether. "It's nothing," he managed, dropping into a nearby armchair and running a hand through his hair distractedly.

"It doesn't look like nothing," Hermione retorted. "Did something happen?"

Harry fought an urge to put his head in his hands. "I don't want to talk about it. I just ... I'm just going to be studying with you again for awhile, okay?"

He watched her bite her lip, hoping she wouldn't ask him to explain any further. "Sure, Harry," she finally replied. "We're glad to have you back. It'll be much nicer to study together again."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but you were probably better off with Malfoy," Ron moaned, sadly eyeing his chessboard. "Hermione's been grilling me on pruning techniques for carnivorous plants for the past hour."

"Yes, well, you obviously needed it, didn't you?" She turned back to Harry who by now was rubbing his temples. "Are you *sure* you're all right?"

"Well, he will be if you stop badgering him," Ron cut in. "Ask *him* about Herbology stuff if you're that eager to ask a million questions."

Harry shot Ron a grateful look. "Yeah, I'll be okay. I just want to spend more time with you two, that's all." Draco was still on his mind but, now that he had physically separated from him, Harry began to feel like he might be able to get his feelings under control again.

"All right," she answered, a tad doubtfully. "Well, like Ron said, we were revising for Herbology. You want me to test you, too?"

He wasn't at all sure how well he would be able to focus, but there was a chance studying would help distract him further. Digging gamely through his hastily packed bag, Harry pulled out his book and sighed, "Oh sure, why not?"

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The next few days were excruciating for Harry. He avoided Draco in every class they shared, and spent every night in the Gryffindor common room, abruptly terminating his study sessions with Draco without so much as an explanation. But despite his efforts, his hoped-for plan to get Draco out of his mind by separating himself from the other boy was not a success. At mealtimes, his eyes were still drawn across the Great Hall, no matter how many times he tried to drag them back. And every night he settled down to his books with Ron and Hermione, he wondered what the Slytherin was doing. Far from distracting him, Hermione's Herbology questions had reminded him too much of the way he and Draco had worked together - he'd spent the whole time making mental comparisons of their revision styles, and missing Draco even more. So after that first night he had begged off and simply sat near them, book on his lap, while they worked without him. Half the time he didn't manage to study at all, instead staring into the fire for long hours, lost in thought. When Ron coaxed him into an occasional round of chess, the rooks often ended up stomping off the board, completely disgusted with Harry's inattention.

On the third day, Ron and Hermione dragged him off to the seventh-year boys' dormitory as soon as they had returned from dinner, and demanded to know what was going on.

"All right," Hermione said, crossing her arms, as Harry sat warily on the edge of the bed. "Something's wrong. What is it?"

"Nothing, I told you-"

Ron waved his hand impatiently. "Come off it, Harry! You've acted strangely ever since you came back to us, not at all like normal."

Harry glanced between the two of them. "Whatever happened to not wanting to let anyone badger me?" he asked Ron.

"Yes, well, it's a duty for blokes to stick up for each other, don't you know?" Ron ignored Hermione's raised eyebrow. "But that was before you stopped talking to anyone, got all mopey, forgot to eat half the time, and started staring across the Great Hall at Malfoy again. And you haven't played chess this badly since we were first-years."

"Harry," Hermione said more gently, coming to sit on the bed beside him. "We're just worried about you."

"Did he do something to you?" Ron interjected.

"Who?"

"Malfoy. Did he do something to you? Is that why you stopped studying with him? I knew that was a bad idea. And I don't care if he's blind or not. If he's hurt you, I'll-" Ron smacked one fist into his palm.

"Ron," Hermione warned. Then she turned back to Harry. "I know you said you didn't want to talk about it, but something is clearly wrong, and we want to help. It's what friends do, remember?"

Harry bit his lip. *Friends.* "Can I ask you something?" he asked, looking at both of them.

"Of course," Hermione answered.

"Okay, we're friends. Good friends. Right?" They nodded. "Have ... have either one of you ever thought about kissing one of us?"

Ron laughed. "I can honestly say that I have never wanted to kiss you, Harry. No offense."

Harry smiled. "None taken." He turned to Hermione. "What about you?"

She tugged on a lock of hair, which Harry recognised as a sign she was thinking. "I suppose the idea crossed my mind, back when we were younger," she answered slowly. "But I knew you and I would always be better as just friends. So ... no, not really." Then she frowned. "Harry, does this have to do with Malfoy?"

"Well..." Harry hesitated, glancing between his two friends. Then he drew a deep breath and dropped his eyes to the floor. There was no escaping now. "Yes," he whispered.

"You've kissed Malfoy?!" Ron shouted. "Ugh!"

"Ron, please!" Hermione interjected. Harry felt her hand on his chin, and he raised his head to look into her concerned eyes. "Harry?"

"No, no I haven't," he told them. Then he swallowed. "But I wanted to." He explained briefly what had happened the other night in the study room.

Ron frowned slightly. "Are you saying you're gay?"

"I don't know!" Confused, Harry jumped off the bed and started pacing the room, hands balled into fists. "I mean, I liked Cho. A lot. And there've been other girls too. But then there was Benjamin-"

"Benjamin?" Ron broke in again. "That Ravenclaw Keeper?"

Harry nodded miserably. "But I didn't think that was real - just ... I don't know. Admiration for the game he played or something. Only, with Malfoy, it's different. It's really bad - I don't know what's wrong with me. I think I was spending too much time with him or something - that's why I had to get away."

"There isn't necessarily anything 'wrong' with you," Hermione told him soothingly. "Some people are just like that - bisexual." She came and put a hand on his shoulder. "Now, let me ask you the question you asked us. Have you ever wanted to kiss one of us?"

"No," he replied immediately.

Hermione chuckled, rolling her eyes. "Glad to know you gave it some thought, then." Then she sobered. "But see? The three of us have spent way more time together - six and a half years, and part of several summers - and nothing has ever happened, right?"

"Apart from all the near-death experiences, she means," Ron said.

Harry grinned, in spite of himself. "Apart from them, no."

"So ... then I'm guessing what you're feeling about Malfoy has nothing to do with the amount of

time you're spending with him."

"Oh." He dropped back on the bed, defeated.

"Harry, are you serious?" Ron asked, sounding incredulous. "You really ... like ... Malfoy?"

He looked up into his friend's expressive face. "Would you hate me if I said yes?"

Ron sighed. "Well, I don't hate you for being ... for apparently liking both boys and girls. But I have to admit I bloody well don't get it, either. Mum and Dad have a couple of gay friends ... I guess it's not that big a deal, even though it still seems a bit strange." He paced around the room a few steps, his expression darkening somewhat. "It's just ... Malfoy? Does it have to be Malfoy? I can't believe you've fallen for that git!"

"It's not like I planned it," Harry answered, defensively. "And anyway, he's different now. He's not at all the nasty person he used to be. After the accident, he just ... started leaving people alone, and he's told me his father-" Harry hesitated, wanting to protect Draco's privacy. "Well, he's not going off to Voldemort or anything," he finished.

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that," Hermione answered. "And I'll grant you that he hasn't said two words to me, either good or bad, since his return. But I still don't know how you can just forget six years of abuse, Harry. He did some pretty awful things to you over the years."

"And to you two, as well." Harry gave voice to what Hermione had left unspoken; he knew they were all thinking it anyway. "I know, I know," he sighed. "But - it's like he's a different person now, and the little bastard was someone else entirely. We're friends now."

"All right," Hermione sighed, after a moment's pause. "Well, we'll have to take your word for it." Then she looked at him more sternly. "But you have to talk to him."

"What?" Harry flinched back at the thought. "No. No, I can't."

"Harry, you have to. If you're really friends, like you say you are, then you can't just cut it off over something like this. I'm betting you didn't even tell him why you ran off, did you?"

"What am I supposed to say? 'Sorry, can't study with you because I want to snog you'?"

"Too much information," Ron muttered.

"Well, you have to say *something,*" she insisted.

Harry just shook his head. "I can't."

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Draco Malfoy was furious.

First, he had been confused. Then hurt. Now he had moved on to full-blown anger.

Harry's behaviour at the start of the week had been strange. Although he'd seemed fairly normal after Saturday's events, and their interaction in Care of Magical Creatures on Monday had been too brief to judge, by that evening he'd become progressively more stilted. Then he'd abruptly disappeared in a flurry of words which hadn't made any sense and certainly didn't pass for an explanation.

At first he'd been worried. Was Harry sick? Had something happened? Nightmares? Was he in trouble? Draco had finished his evening's work alone, one corner of his mind constantly replaying what had happened in the study room that night, wondering what was wrong. He'd been enjoying the other boy's company; true to his word, Harry had not brought up Draco's emotional collapse on Saturday, and Draco found that, instead of making things awkward, the event somehow served to make him feel closer to Harry. Like a shared secret between them. And to have him nearby again ... it made Draco feel good. But then Harry had suddenly stammered out some empty excuse and had fled, his footsteps rapidly dissipating, leaving behind a stunned silence.

In Potions there was rarely the opportunity to talk, as Professor Snape generally kept them hard at work; also, Harry sat with his friends at the table behind Draco, affording little chance for direct interaction. But during class the next day, he realised Harry was directly ahead of him in line to get ingredients from Snape when he heard the Gryffindor answer a question from the professor. Seizing the chance, he reached out grabbed the first thing he could find, which happened to be Harry's arm.

"Are you okay?" he whispered as the other boy turned to leave. "Where did you go?"

But Harry had pulled out of his grasp and disappeared out of range without a word, making Draco initially doubt his identification. He was almost positive he'd had the right person; even through his robes, the radiant warmth of his skin was apparent, that distinctive *feel* which marked him. And the voice he'd heard previously had definitely been Harry's.

Still ... there was always the slim possibility another student had been next to Harry, and perhaps he had grabbed the wrong person. There wasn't any other opportunity for Draco to single the other boy out for the rest of the class, but when Harry failed to show up for his usual study time that night, it became blatantly obvious that the Gryffindor was avoiding him. Why?

He wondered if it was because of Saturday after all. Harry had seemed to take it all in stride, but perhaps Draco had said too much, had been too weak. Harry was a *Gryffindor*, after all, brave and strong and whatever other traits the Sorting Hat claimed. There was no room for weakness. He'd already criticised Draco's self-pitying once, long before Draco himself had been willing to own up to it. Was that it? Had he abandoned Draco over this, become sick of dealing with him and his disability?

But what about the face touching? That incredible moment between them - or at least, that's how it had seemed to him. He did not think he could have misinterpreted Harry's feelings then - there was no lying with touch. Harry had never been very good at keeping emotions off of his face, so presumably even then, if he'd felt something negative, Draco should have been able to pick up on it with his hands.

Then again, that moment had been immediately after all the other events. The Gryffindor had just played a full game of Quidditch, then had taken Draco flying, witnessed his outburst, and had gone right on to touching him. Perhaps it had been only later, in the intervening day and a half, that he'd reconsidered his position.

This was when hurt had set in. Draco had told himself all along not to depend on anyone, not to show weakness, not to open himself up. And he had done it anyway. He had let Harry help him, even though it couldn't have possibly equaled the help the other boy claimed to receive in return. He had told Harry things he had never told anyone. He had touched him, flown as one with him, felt his heartbeat under his fingers ... and now he was gone.

Draco's reaction, once realisation set in, was to re-isolate himself. The first forays he'd made with his Slytherin housemates were withdrawn, and he once again went through his entire day speaking to no one unless absolutely necessary. Having tasted even that small bit of companionship with his housemates, and after all the time spent with the Gryffindor, the sudden solitude was agonising. But he was determined. No one would reject him again. He re-committed himself to his determination to make it on his own, without *anyone*. No one. Not even Harry. Especially not Harry.

But he couldn't stop thinking about Harry. The more he thought, in all those hours when he sat alone, the angrier he became. Harry was always telling Draco he should talk more. Talk to people instead of isolating himself, talk about his troubles, talk, talk, talk. Yet Harry had pulled away without one fucking word to him in explanation. Draco had laid himself bare by admitting everything that was going on inside of him - the least Harry could do would be explain himself. He'd forced Draco to face some of his demons - like flying - yet had now run away from whatever the fuck his current problem was.

Well, fine. Draco didn't need him. He'd never needed him. And just to prove to himself that he was bigger than Harry, by the end of the week he decided to re-enter the Slytherin social sphere after all. He wouldn't open up to them like he had to the Gryffindor, but he decided there was little harm in joining them for some house-bashing now and then. He wondered if Harry still sat facing the Slytherins; he hoped he did. Let him see Draco talk with Blaise and laugh at Malcolm's stupid jokes and get along just fine without him.

But late at night, in the sheltered world behind his bedcurtains, the laughter often turned to tears. Tears of anger at himself and at Harry. And tears of loss, for something nameless which had crept up and made his life better, which had given him a few bright glimpses in his dark universe. His hands would trace over his own features, over his damp lashes and solemn mouth, trying to

remember the moment Harry's gentle fingers had touched not just his face, but his entire being. All that was left now was a hollow emptiness, echoing with an unnamed emotion.

But such feelings had long been removed from his vocabulary, and he would not allow himself to recognise what it was he wanted.

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Chapter: 9

P>**[Chapter 8]**
Steps

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.
-- Shakespeare (A Midsummer Night's Dream)

The week felt interminable to Draco, who spent it trying to ignore Harry in class as much as he was being ignored, and studying late into the night while wondering yet again what the Gryffindor was up to and why he had left. But finally Saturday rolled around, the day of the Hogsmeade visit. Going with Harry was out of the question, of course, and, despite an invitation from Millicent to share a table and a few pints at the Three Broomsticks, Draco decided to stay at the castle. He just wasn't in the mood to be part of her desperate attempts to leave Slytherin's mark on the town, and there was no particular business he really needed to take care of which couldn't be handled more easily by owl. He assumed Harry had gone to town as part of the Perpetual Trio, and there was both a sense of relief and of emptiness at the realisation that he would not have to deal with the other boy's invisible presence that day.

He spent the morning studying alone, as usual, then made his way to the unusually quiet Great Hall when it was time for lunch. Blaise was the only other seventh-year Slytherin to have stayed behind, and he and Draco talked intermittently about Potions as they ate.

"Can I ask you something?" Blaise asked through a mouthful of food.

Draco shrugged. "Sure," he replied, expecting another question about the difficult Veritaserum preparation process.

"What did you do to Potter?"

"What?" Draco's head snapped up. "Why?"

"He's been watching you the whole meal. In fact, he's been watching you for the past few days, but it's much more obvious now that he doesn't have his little cronies around."

Even after all this time without sight, his first urge was to turn and look, to verify with his own eyes. "Potter's alone?" he asked, controlling his voice and the pointless impulse with an effort.

"Yeah. Apparently we're not the only losers who skipped the Hogsmeade visit," Blaise said with a laugh. "So, what did you do to him? What *could* you do to him?"

Draco ignored the thoughtless remark. Anger suddenly returned in full force. Harry couldn't say two words to him, but could sit and stare at him all week long? No, he was going to explain himself, and he was going to do it now. There were no sidekicks to get in the way, no lessons to run off to.

He pushed back his chair. "*Tendo* - Gryffindor table," he told his Leader, speeding off so quickly to its directions that had anyone stepped across his path, the orb would have been unable to warn him in time.

"At destination," came the Leader's voice. It could not recognise individual people, only places. So now he was at the table, with no idea as to where exactly Harry was. He began to work his way down the table, on the outer side, where the other boy would have to be sitting if he'd been staring.

"Potter, we're going to talk. Now," he spoke, low but clear, trailing one hand along the backs of the chairs as he walked toward the centre of the table.

No response.

"Do you want me to raise my voice and have me say this to the entire hall?"

"Stop it," Harry hissed; the harsh tone came from behind, from where Draco had already passed.

He backtracked toward the sound until he was stopped by a hand on his wrist. Harry's telltale warmth seeped into his skin almost immediately.

Draco turned his head. "You want me to stop? Fine. Are you going to talk?"

There was a pause. "Not here," the Gryffindor finally bit out, letting go of his wrist. He heard a chair scrape back. "Outside. Entrance Hall." Footsteps stomped off away from him as he set his Leader to the specified destination.

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Cornered, Harry paced the Entrance Hall during the few moments it took for Draco to catch up with him. He'd fobbed Ron and Hermione off that morning, claiming he was too tired to join

them at Hogsmeade and that he needed to do homework; he doubted either of his friends believed his excuses, but they had acquiesced, leaving him alone to brood ... and to watch.

Draco came into the Hall and paused for a moment, obviously trying to detect Harry's position. "I hear footsteps," he accused, as soon as the heavy doors had fallen shut behind him. "If you're trying to give me the slip, Potter, it won't work."

Harry stopped pacing. "I'm right here, so you can stop with the threats." He watched the other boy head in his direction, stopping when his Leader warned him of the impending collision. "What do you want?" he snapped, more harshly than he'd intended.

"What do you think? I want to know what the hell is going on with you."

Harry bit his lip. He should have known Draco would eventually demand an explanation. "Me? I'm fine," he answered, changing tactics entirely and forcing a light, casual tone.

"Well, you didn't *seem* fine last Monday, when you left so abruptly," Draco bit back. "And you haven't talked to me all week. You've always been after me to talk. It's your turn now. Explain yourself."

Despite being on the wrong end of the Slytherin's fury, Harry found he was once again being adversely affected by the other boy's proximity. He took a deep breath and turned his eyes to skim to Draco's left, avoiding looking at him directly. "I just realised how much I missed being with Ron and Hermione," he lied. "I wanted to spend more time with them. That's all."

Draco took a step back. "I don't believe you."

Harry shrugged, hoping Draco couldn't hear the way his heart was pounding in his chest. "What's not to believe? We've been friends for ages - it's only natural I'd miss them."

"It took you nearly three months to figure this out? And when it did, it was such an emergency that you had to run off without a proper explanation?"

"Well, what do you think the reason was?" Harry challenged, desperately lobbing the ball back in Draco's court.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe you just got sick to death of me and didn't have the guts to say so?" Harry watched as the other boy turned his head, letting his hair fall between them as if he didn't want to be seen. "You played a nice game of being understanding, but when it really came down to it, you couldn't handle all my crap anymore." He took a breath. "The dependency, the breakdown - everything."

"Oh, no, Draco," Harry responded automatically, instantly wanting to erase the self-loathing he saw on the other boy's face, beneath the blond threads. "That's not it at all."

Draco's head snapped up. "How dare you!"

"What?"

"My name. That's the second time you've used my name. Don't you dare use that to manipulate me, not if you've decided our *friendship*," he spat, "is so insignificant that you can't even tell me the truth."

Harry cursed silently. He hadn't thought at all before opening his mouth - it had just slipped out in response to the emotion he'd seen. "I *am* telling the truth," he said. "I swear - it has nothing to do with your blindness at all."

"So what *is* it? No more lies, Potter."

"I told you, I just missed-"

Before he could blink, Draco's hand had shot out and grabbed the front of his jumper. It took his nimble fingers only moments to sufficiently orient themselves and climb up to Harry's face.

"What are you doing?" he cried, trying to pull away. But one hand snaked behind his neck, holding him in place.

"I'm 'looking' at you. Finding out the truth. Your words, your voice - they're not saying the same things and it doesn't make any sense to me. But you've never been good at keeping the truth off your face, what you're really feeling."

Harry was held paralysed by the feel of Draco's hands against his skin, the warmth of his closeness. One hand curled into the hair at the nape of his neck, and the other was brushing over his eyebrows, his lips, everywhere. Draco's face filled his entire vision, and the urge to lean into the palm which now cupped his cheek was almost overwhelming. He couldn't take much more. "Please don't," he whispered.

The hand didn't move. "Give me one good reason why not."

"Because-" Harry took a deep breath. The Slytherin's thumb slipped a little across his cheek; his mouth was mere inches away. Time seemed to slow, and he could feel his walls falling, falling.... "Because," he repeated, his voice shaking slightly, "it makes me want to do this."

And, taking Draco's face between his own hands, he leaned in and placed a soft kiss on the other boy's mouth.

Then he twisted out of Draco's grip, and fled to his common room.

He wasn't sure he would ever come down again.

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Draco stood at the foot of the stairwell, wondering if he was about to embark on a wild goose chase.

When Harry had kissed him that afternoon and then disappeared, Draco had remained motionless, stunned. Only when he'd heard some students emerge from the Great Hall, whispering curiously and unthinkingly about his and Harry's confrontation, as if he had lost his hearing as well as his eyesight, had he retreated to the library to think. It felt like he'd done nothing *but* think lately, with all that had happened to him, and to them. *Them.* Since losing his vision, Draco had studiously avoided the concept of 'them'. In his own self-doubt, he hadn't imagined anyone would ever want to be a 'them' with him. But apparently someone did. Harry. At least, assuming that kiss actually meant something, and if there was one thing Harry was bad at, it was guile. Which meant he really did want Draco.

And Draco wanted him, too. For the first time, he was again allowing himself to even contemplate such things, and, once he got over the shock, he realised instinctively that he'd wanted Harry for some time. He remembered how they had fitted together on the broom, how Harry's warmth had felt under his hands. How they pushed each other and equaled each other, even though his blindness usually left him feeling at a disadvantage. He didn't know what it would be like to shift their relationship, but there was no way he was going to let that kiss go unanswered. Even now, he was remembering the soft lips pressed against his own mouth.

The problem was the Gryffindor seemed to have vanished. Draco recognised Harry's fear; he was all too familiar with the urge to pull away from situations involving other people, people whose reactions you couldn't trust. And Harry clearly did not know Draco's feelings; reasonable enough, since he himself hadn't identified them until just now. So. Now it was time to find him and tell him. Only - where was he?

Harry had not come down to dinner. Draco hadn't even had to ask - Blaise had chuckled a hearty congratulations as soon as he'd sat down, in praise of Draco's supposed victory in the fight Blaise thought had happened. Draco hadn't bothered to correct him, but instead had sat silently stewing over his meal, wondering where Harry was. To search for someone in this enormous castle when you could see was bad enough. To search blind, literally, was going to be next to impossible.

It seemed reasonable, however, to start with Harry's house, which is why he was standing here now, at the foot of a certain eastern stairway near the Great Hall. He wasn't even sure if he *could* find the Gryffindor common room - he had never been there before and, except for the recollection that Gryffindors came and went from these stairs, hadn't any further notion how to get there. His Leader had been programmed specially for him, with many of the more permanent rooms at Hogwarts mapped out internally, but he wasn't sure how extensive the information was, given that he wasn't expected to go to any house other than his own.

"Er ... *tendo* Gryffindor common room," he told his Leader, fully anticipating it wouldn't recognise the command.

But the device didn't hesitate "Twenty-seven stairs, up," it directed. And, praying that it was actually correct and not about to lose him in the depths of the castle, he hastened to follow.

He rarely went anywhere unfamiliar and, as with the tandem flight, he found it incredibly disorienting. His classes, his common room - they were all places he had once seen, and it made it easier to trust the Leader and keep a mental map of his position as he went along. Now he was truly walking blind, to a place where, if something went wrong, he'd have no chance to work his way out again without a sighted person. Assuming he could find one.

Up and up he climbed, then down an echoing hallway and up more stairs. *No wonder Longbottom slimmed down over the years,* he thought. *All these stairs would give anyone good exercise.* It was a miracle beanpole Weasley hadn't disappeared altogether.

Just as he was convinced his Leader had become confused and he was going to end up on the roof somewhere, it informed him that he'd arrived at destination.

Now what? He was 'there', but he didn't have any idea where 'there' was, what it looked like, or what was around him. He hadn't felt this lost or helpless in a long time, and for a moment, he considered giving up and devising some other plan. Only his need to talk to Harry, to be with him, steeled his resolve. If he had to, he'd just stand here on the spot until some Gryffindor came by.

"Password?" An elderly woman's voice suddenly spoke above him, followed by a yawn.

He jumped out of his skin at the sound. "What?" Did they have a doorkeeper of some sort?

"You must give me the password, dear. I can't let you in without one."

Draco stepped toward the voice, one hand out in front of him. "Who are you? Please, I just need to see Harry - could you tell him I'm here?"

"I'm sorry - there are no portraits in the dormitory rooms. You need to give me the password."

"Wall," the Leader warned just as Draco's hand encountered the corner of a carved frame. The speaker's words came back to him. "Are you a portrait?" he asked.

"Yes, dear, what else would I be? Now, are you going to give me the password or not?"

Well, at least now he knew what he was up against. He wasn't sure if a talking picture was more or less irritating than a featureless stone wall - there were days he hadn't paid attention to his steps and had overshot the Slytherin entrance by a few paces, and finding it again was always difficult.

"No ... I can't," he told the portrait. "I'll ... is it all right if I just wait here?"

"Certainly," came the answer. "Now, if you don't mind, I think I'll go back to my nap...."

And Draco found himself once again surrounded by silence. He stayed where he was, hoping that another student would come either in or out, and would be generous enough to permit him entrance.

At long last, he heard the portrait creak open and he turned immediately, hoping it was someone he knew. "What are *you* doing here?" came a boy's voice. Well, they obviously knew *him*, but Draco couldn't immediately identify the speaker in return.

"Could you get Potter? I want to talk to him," he asked, praying whoever it was was feeling cooperative.

"Heard you challenged him at lunch or something like that. You trying to sneak in to finish the job?" the mystery boy scoffed.

Draco held his tongue in check by the barest margin. "If I was trying to sneak in, I wouldn't be asking you for admittance, would I?" Then he blew out a breath. "Look, it's important. Please."

There came an answering sigh. "Yeah, awright, give me a minute to go back and see where he's got to. I haven't seen him all day."

The portrait creaked closed again, leaving Draco to cool his heels and wonder if the boy would conveniently forget about him. He didn't have long to wait, however; a few minutes later, the entrance creaked open once more. But it wasn't Harry.

"Malfoy, what are you doing here?"

"Granger." Her voice, at least, was easily recognizable. "I need to talk to Potter - could you get him?"

"I can't."

"You *can't?* Why the hell not?"

"Because he won't come down - not even for us."

"What?!" This was getting ridiculous. "All right, that's it," he told Hermione, prepared to push past her if he had to. "The only reason I'm here at all is because he hounded me to stop isolating myself so much. Made me get off my sorry arse, and at least try to rejoin the world again. So I'll be damned if I'm going to let him get away with hiding now."

There was a pause. "All right," she said.

"All right?"

"All right, you can come in."

Draco didn't wait for her to change her mind. He tried to move forward, but almost immediately his Leader piped a warning - an obstacle in his path.

He held his position, confused. "*Obstacle?* Granger, what is this?"

"The entrance is a hole about two feet up," she explained. He felt a cool hand grasp his wrist, pulling his arm down until he touched the rim of the entryway. With her guidance, he scrambled through.

"Where is he?" he asked, once he was fully upright again.

"In his room, we think. Ron saw his glasses on the bedside table, and it's not likely he slipped off somewhere else without them. But," and her voice was soft, "he won't talk to either of us. What makes you think he'll talk to you?"

"He'll talk to me," Draco growled. "After everything that ... well, there are some things he needs to know. And, like I said, I've got some debts to call in - he's not getting away with hiding. Not from me."

"Malfoy-" She paused again. "Look, I don't know exactly what happened today. Ron and I went to Hogsmeade, and he refused to come. However, several other people who stayed behind told me there was some sort of confrontation between you two. Harry's defended you more than once already, which is the only reason why I'm letting you in now. But if you hurt him...."

"I promise, I'm not here to poison him," he replied. He hesitated a moment, then decided to risk telling her more; although he could hear in the girl's voice that she still didn't think too highly of him, at least she was helping. "I'm not perfect, Granger, but I'm not who I used to be either. Trust me," he added with a wry grin, "if you ever lose part of yourself, you'll see the world differently too. I don't like asking for help. I never did. I never will. But my whole life was turned upside down, and Potter, in his infuriating, heroic way, shoehorned his way in and made it ... better.

"There's a lot of stuff you don't know about what he's done, about us, but it needs to be talked about. And I'm betting there's a room full of Gryffindors glaring at me right now, so if you could just tell me where his room is, I'll be on my way."

To his relief, Hermione laughed in response. "I don't know how you know, but you're right. Do you want me to take you myself, in case anyone tries to do more than glare?"

"No," he answered shortly. It was still his natural inclination to refuse any unnecessary assistance, and the idea of being defended like an invalid rankled. "I'll be fine. And, thanks to Potter, I can still hex people with the best of them. Directions, please?"

"All right, all right." She turned him slightly to the left. "There's a stairway about twenty feet in front of you. Go up those stairs to the top, and there'll be a door on the right. His bed is the first one on the right. And Malfoy-" She paused. "Thanks."

He turned his head back toward her voice. "For what?"

"For apparently being the friend Harry said you were."

He wondered what Harry had really said about him, but let the remark pass with just a nod. He didn't really want to be talking to Hermione at all - it was Harry he'd come all this way for.

He set off to climb the final flight of stairs.

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Harry lay curled under his blankets in the dark room, wondering for the millionth time what had possessed him to actually kiss Draco Malfoy. He'd thought about it, dreamt about it both waking and sleeping, and had resigned himself to staying away from the Slytherin for as long as it took to get it out of his head. The more he thought about it, the more Hermione's pronouncement that he was bisexual made sense. That was still rather new and disturbing in a way, but, now that nearly a week had passed, he also knew it was true; like learning he was a wizard, he knew he'd probably get used to it. No, it was specifically his attraction to *Draco* which was a problem - he'd worked so hard to dig the blind boy out of his shell, and they'd created this precarious and strange friendship, so different from what he had with Hermione and Ron. And he'd ruined it with his stupid attraction. Thank God he hadn't ever wanted to kiss either Hermione or Ron - he wasn't sure he could have stood losing either of them.

Not that he was happy about losing Draco, either. Even though he was the one who had insisted on staying away, he missed the banter, the way they pushed each other without being bossy like Hermione was, or laid-back, the way Ron often was. He remembered sharing the broom, the way they had flown together. He remembered the profound intimacy in touch. Which reminded him again of the kiss. Sweet, bitter, and stupid, stupid, stupid. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, wishing he could erase the image which played over and over in his mind, of Draco's hand reaching out to touch him.

The door to his dormitory creaked open, and he lay still, hoping that whoever it was would just get what he needed and go on his way. Ron had come in once already, calling for him, but Harry had refused to talk. He just couldn't. He couldn't explain what he'd done, or how the kiss was both wonderful and terrible all at once. It was too personal. And he was too miserable.

Footsteps approached the bed, and he heard the sound of the curtains being pulled apart.

"Ron, I told you, I just can't t-"

"It's not Weasley."

Harry bolted upright in bed. His glasses were off, and the room beyond his bedcurtains was dark, but he could just make out a faint shadow against the blackness. "Malfoy, how did you get in here?"

"A Giant dropped me off at the window. How do you think I got here? I climbed those ten million stairs to your common room, and Granger let me in. And, incidentally, couldn't you Gryffindors come up with a more dignified way of getting in, other than climbing through a portrait hole?"

"Did you come all this way to insult my house?"

There was a sigh from the shadow. "No, I didn't. I came to talk to you." The mattress bent as Draco climbed onto the foot of his bed, then the curtains fell shut, and even the blurred shadows disappeared. Harry pulled his knees up, away from Draco's weight. Creating a barrier.

"I don't want to talk."

"Potter, you've spent much of the past several months reminding me that pulling away is not the answer. And so here I am. I've talked to a few of my housemates recently, I've talked to Granger tonight, and I've talked a hell of a lot to you. The least you can do is follow your own advice. You wouldn't let me run off, and now I'm not going to let you run off. You are not going to hide forever. You are going to talk."

"God, I created a monster," Harry moaned. Then he swallowed. "Look, if it's about the kiss, let's make this mercifully short. I'm sorry, and I swear, I'll never do it again. Now will you leave me alone?"

"No."

"What else do you want from me?" Harry cried. He couldn't believe Draco was stretching this out.

There was a small pause. "What if I wanted you to do it again?"

"What?"

"The kiss." The mattress shifted as Draco moved closer. A hand reached out and found his leg. "Did you mean that?"

Harry pressed his forehead to his knees, wishing again he could block the memory from his mind. "Yes," he choked, the sound barely audible. "I didn't ... I mean, I tried not to, but I couldn't, I just *couldn't*, and...." The touch was a shock to his system. He wanted to pull away, but couldn't bear to lose the much-wanted contact either. "Please," he whispered, the sound almost a moan.

"You're not helping."

The hand didn't move. "And you're not listening," Draco said softly. "We have to talk about what happened today, yes. But it's not because I hate you. I ... liked it. And you." Harry heard him take a breath. "I want you to do it again. Do you still.... Are you still interested?"

Harry didn't move. His heart was hammering in his throat. "You can't mean that."

"Harry, look at me."

He lifted his head, but there was nothing to see. "I ... I can't. It's completely dark in here, and, anyway, I don't have my glasses."

There was a soft laugh in the blackness. "Really? Well, we're on equal footing, then, aren't we?" The hand on his leg skimmed forward over the blankets until it found his arm, and then his hand. "So - look at me the way I look at you. With your fingers. And you'll see what the truth is."

Harry felt his hand being pulled forward until he made contact with Draco's face. The other boy's features were relaxed, with no hint of tension or deception. Lashes whispered softly against his fingers, the lips curved into a light smile. The Slytherin leaned into his hand as he cupped the slightly stubbled cheek and brushed his thumb over the soft mouth. Draco's tongue darted out to mark the exploring tip, and Harry gasped at the miniature jolt he felt.

"Do you see? Do you understand?" It was the barest whisper, speaking of so much more.

He was overwhelmed. There were no words to express his feelings, his amazement, his desire. But Draco seemed to understand his silence. A hand snaked around behind his neck and was pulling him in, and then they were kissing, a little awkwardly at first as they tried to find each other in their respective darknesses. But then mouths aligned, and lips parted, and the kisses grew stronger, surer. Tongues took over for their hands as a means of exploring, of learning new secrets of taste and texture and warmth. If the earlier kiss had been the question, this one provided the answer. *Yes.*

When they finally pulled apart, Harry found he still didn't know what to say. "So ... you're bi, too?" he finally blurted out.

Draco laughed. "No, I'm actually outright gay. I've known it for ages. Apparently my housemates are more closemouthed than I give them credit for - it was rather an open secret down in the dungeons."

"Oh," Harry muttered, embarrassed. "Well, I - I'm only just figuring things out. And--" he raised his head, even though it was still too dark to see. "I actually did hear rumours - rumours that you were going to marry some German girl from a dark family. How was I to know you were really gay?"

The voice in the dark turned unexpectedly serious. "That was the truth. Malfoys marry for politics - my sexuality wasn't considered a deterrent at all. It was all arranged."

His heart sank. "Oh," he said again. "So, I guess that means-"

"The wedding's off," Draco interrupted with a much harsher laugh. "You think the Gegenfurtners wanted to be associated with a powerless blind boy?"

"You're not powerless!" Harry protested.

"I am to them," Draco returned, evenly. "Whatever I end up doing with my life, it won't be serving the Dark Lord or anything remotely like that. They wanted nothing to do with me after the accident." The voice dropped to a whisper, catching slightly. "I didn't think anyone would ever want me. Not like this."

Harry reached out carefully, finding the other boy's shoulder and following the slope of his neck up to his hair. He brushed a few light strands through his fingers. "I want you. Just as you are."

He felt Draco take his hand and kiss his palm. "And I want you. I might have known for a long time who I was, but I gave up on being able to act on it. After I lost my eyesight, I believed I would always be alone and 'want' did not exist. But after you kissed me this afternoon, everything changed - I let myself feel interest, and it was there, waiting. So, in a way, I'm just figuring things out too."

"I just wish I'd known sooner that it was even possible," Harry sighed. "That's why I ... panicked, I guess you'd say. I thought my attraction would ruin our friendship, and that if I stayed away from you for awhile, I could get myself straightened out. I didn't know what else to do."

"And all I knew was that I'd suddenly lost the only person who seemed to care about me, without any explanation."

Harry felt his cheeks redden. "I'm sorry."

"Well, I won't say I'm completely over it yet, but I'm getting there." Light fingers traced the outline of his hand. "I've had to learn to trust a lot these past few months, something I was never terribly good at. Trust my Leader not to walk me into a wall, trust the Quill to take accurate notes, trust what people tell me about my surroundings -- everything. But you made me trust you. You came when you said you would, you walked me back in one piece, you got me on a broom again, and ... you've seen things no one else has. Now it's your turn. Promise me that you'll trust me, and you'll talk to me instead of just disappearing if something happens."

Harry didn't hesitate. "I promise."

He knew that words were sometimes easier than actions; too many people promised things and then never followed up. But Harry, who had grown up without any reason to trust anyone,

recognised how crucial it was. Hadn't he made a point at the very beginning, of living up to his promises to study with Draco? He shook his head mentally, chagrined at himself for breaking his own rules with his behaviour this past week. No more. Draco had trusted him with his life on more than one occasion. The least Harry could do was trust him with his heart.

Draco's voice broke the silence. "What are you thinking?"

Harry closed his hand around Draco's and drew the other boy in. "Come and see for yourself."

[End]

They say love is blindness of heart; I say not to love is blindness.
-- Victor Hugo