Choices of the Heart

"The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing..."

~Pascal, Pensées, translated by A.J. Krailsheimer

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The place Harry had once described as 'like King's Cross station' was filled with a shining white mist, as if light itself had acquiesced to have form. This time, the high arched windows glowed with colour like stained glass, and as Harry stood again in this place of waiting, he was transfixed by its serene beauty. This time, nothing marred the silence of the high, hallowed space. And Harry, after gazing up in awe for several moments, looked down at his white-robed, barefooted self, and wondered why he was here.

As if his questioning thought stirred the air, the mist swirled and formed and parted before him. Figures walked towards him out of the mist, seeming almost to form from the mist as they came. Harry held his ground, waiting. He felt no threat here, no sense but a dreamy, still peacefulness. The figures came closer, nearly fifty or so of them, and suddenly Harry knew them. His heart soared and he stepped forward to meet them gladly.

Here were Fred, and Lupin and Tonks, and Colin, and all of those who had died fighting Voldemort and his followers at the Battle of Hogwarts. They crowded around him, and whispers of "Harry," "It's Harry,"

"Harry Potter," "No, it can't be!" "No!" began to echo through the vaulted room. The faces of all these fallen comrades were sad, angry, heartbroken.

It was Lupin who finally spoke. "Harry?" he said, his eyes filled with regret and disbelief. "I had so hoped we wouldn't see you here."

Tonks stepped up and took Lupin's arm. "Wotcher, Harry," she said, in a cheerless, subdued parody of her living self. "We all hoped... you wouldn't..."

Fred came forward next. "I was so sure you would win," he said, and Harry knew he'd never in life seen Fred look so disappointed or defeated.

And Harry suddenly understood. They thought he was dead, that Voldemort had killed him. That Voldemort had won the war they'd given their lives to help him win. He wasn't sure how it was that he was here, but he did know that he had beaten Voldemort. That he wasn't dead.

"But I did win!" he told Fred, and he grinned. "We won! Do you hear me?" he called out to the crowd that gathered around him. "We WON! Voldemort is dead!"

"But you're here..." said Lupin, "with us..."

"I dunno," said Harry. "I think I'm... sleeping... or dreaming... or something. But I know I'm not dead. I beat Voldemort and the war is over." He looked out at all the puzzled, grieving faces that surrounded him. "I think maybe I've come to say goodbye... and to tell you what happened... so that you know your deaths meant something before you go on." He had to stop a moment then, to take a deep breath. "I could never have done it without all of you..." he added quietly, proudly. "All of you meant so much..."

"Tell us what happened, Harry," said Tonks, and Harry saw the first glimmers of triumph sparkle in her eyes. "Tell us how you snuffed the bloody bastard! We've been going crazy to know what happened."

So Harry told them how it had come to be that he had defeated the greatest Dark Wizard of the age with a simple Expelliarmus spell. "He basically killed himself," said Harry at the end. "It wasn't really me at all." And when he looked out at all the friends and comrades who had died to help him win, he felt a great lump in his throat, and had to stop speaking, but all the faces that looked back at him now were smiling and joyous. That joy, he realised, just in that moment, was what he'd been brought here to give back to them.

"I think we can go on, now," said Lupin, and he was smiling, holding hands with Tonks. "I'm so proud of you, Harry. Your mum and dad would be so proud of you."

"You'll take good care of our little Teddy, won't you?" asked Tonks, and at Harry's nod, she stepped forward and brushed a misty kiss against his cheek. "We always knew we could count on you, Harry," she whispered.

Then she and Lupin turned away, and beyond them now, Harry could see a sleek, silver, light-filled train. There were no tracks and no wheels; it seemed to hover in mid-air, awaiting those who would travel on from this place. He heard their final words as they vanished into the light within the train's open car. "Goodbye! Goodbye, Harry!" He had to blink away the tears then, knowing he would never see them again.

Colin came forward next. "I wanted to fight," he said with solemn pride. "I knew I was too young, but I don't regret that I died, if you won." He smiled at Harry, and Harry wiped away his tears and smiled back. "Tell them that, when you go back. Tell my family. I don't want them to be sorry for what I did."

"You were great, Colin," he said, softly. "I'll tell them what you said." Colin beamed at him, just as he'd done so many times in life. Then he, too, stepped aboard the silver train and disappeared into the light.

Others came and shook Harry's hand, or simply passed near to smile and thank him. Some of them he knew by name, others he had never seen before in his life. But they all knew Harry. Harry thanked them from his heart, and gave up trying to keep the tears from rolling down his face, though he was smiling.

At last came Fred, and Harry knew that this might be the hardest goodbye of all.

"I can't pretend that it's not hard to be here without George," he said sincerely. "But you tell that one-eared bugger that I'm okay, yeah? And that I'm gonna come back and haunt him if he wastes one second of his life grieving over this." He looked so serious and stern, and so unlike himself, that Harry could only nod in answer. "Tell Percy he can't blame himself, either."

"I'll tell them," said Harry.

"Give my love to Mum and Dad, and Ginny and Ron and Bill and Charlie and ..." The corner of his mouth came up in a crooked grin. "... and tell Georgie he can have my ear."

"What...?" said Harry, startled.

"You know... like one of those tranz-plants the Muggles do. Dad was telling us about it. George should take my ear. Obviously, I don't need it now and I want ole Holey-Head Georgie to have it." Fred was grinning cheekily at him now, just like his usual self again.

"Tranz-plants," repeated Harry, shaking his head, and grinning back. "Right. I'll tell him."

Fred held out his hand and Harry took it. "We owe you, Harry, me and George. You didn't ever let us down. And just know that I would have been glad to have you in the family," he added with a wink.

Harry blushed. "Thanks," he said. "I'll remember that." Then Fred was gone, stepping into the light inside the silver train, the last to board.

As Harry watched, the shining train moved forward, carrying all the dead of the Battle of Hogwarts on in a silent blaze of light, and then Harry was alone. For a moment, he stood smiling, drying the tears from his face with the cuff of his robe.

Then everything faded away, dissolving back into the shining white mist...

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Harry woke slowly, stretching, and relaxing with a sense of comfort and safety that he hadn't felt in months. The late afternoon sunlight that slanted low and honey-gold through the west windows of the Gryffindor dormitory fell in warm stripes across the foot of his old bed. The first thing he remembered was that Voldemort was finally dead, and he sat up in a rush, elated, a joyous grin spreading across his face.

A moment later, the memory of Fred and Lupin and Tonks and Colin and so many others lying stilled forever on the floor of the Great Hall hit him, dealing a sharp, breath-catching blow to his heart.

Oh, God. So many.

Thinking of them, his dream came drifting back to him, first in small light-filled fragments, then in a rush of shining faces, smiles, and too-short moments; moments that made him smile again, that he knew he would always remember with bittersweet pleasure. The place in his dream had been very similar to the place he'd found himself in after Voldemort had cast the Killing Curse on him in the Forbidden Forest, the place where he'd seen and spoken to Dumbledore again.

But hadn't that all been in his head?

"Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real," said Dumbledore's clear voice again in Harry's memory.

Could it be real? Could this shining peaceful place really be... death? Harry let his thoughts sift through his questions until he found that same sensation of wonder and deep calm he'd experienced in the Place

of Waiting welling up in his heart to silence them all. He closed his eyes, overwhelmed with the sense of joy he felt. In that moment, something shifted inside his mind.

Thinking back, he remembered other words that Dumbledore had spoken in that place:

"You are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying."

Harry recalled the terrible fear he had felt when he'd walked into the Forbidden Forest knowing that he was going to die, but the feeling was distant now, almost as if it had happened to someone else. He had conquered that fear and accepted his death, and now, he realised, the way he saw life and death was changed forever. Dumbledore was right. There were far worse things in life than death, and then he smiled again. Even if he would never be afraid of death ever again, he was, in this moment, very grateful to be alive.

There was so much now to look forward to!

His thoughts went immediately to Ginny, and he ran one hand through his too-long, messy hair, remembering Fred's teasing, and feeling his face heat up. The last time he'd seen her was in the Great Hall, her head on her mother's shoulder. It was startling to realise that that had only been a few hours earlier...

The war had ended just that morning, but it seemed like ages ago, a different lifetime ago. He'd fallen into his old bed fully dressed; dirty from the months of camping, from the battle, from tramping through the Forbidden Forest in the dead of night, from lying dead or not-dead in the mouldering leaves and the dirt at Voldemort's camp. Too exhausted to do anything except pull off his trainers, he'd fallen asleep before his head had even touched the pillow.

Fully awake now, Harry reached for his glasses and found that the plate of sandwiches Kreacher had brought to him in the common room before he'd come upstairs, now sat refilled on the bedside table. He grabbed several, mentally thanking the old house-elf as he stood, stuck his feet back into his worn trainers, and headed for the showers. He needed to find Ginny. Really, it was past time that he should be

finding her, he thought, but he was not going to go down until he was cleaned up.

The hot water of the shower went a long way towards making him feel like life could be normal again. He cast a couple of hurried cleaning spells on his clothes, spells Hermione had taught him during the long days in the tent, and put them back on. There would be time to find proper clean clothes later.

Finally, feeling cleaner and better fed than he'd been in months, Harry clattered down the Tower stairs to the deserted common room, amazed by the day. The long terrible year was done. The war with Voldemort was over at last.

That sense of euphoria bubbled up again, though he felt a little guilty for sleeping so long. He should have been downstairs before now; he should have been with the Weasleys, with Ron and Ginny, to share their grief. For a fleeting moment, he wondered why they hadn't come looking for him, why they weren't here now waiting in the common room, and he felt a growing urgency to get down to the Great Hall and find them.

The last thing Harry expected as he stepped out of the portrait hole was to stumble over Draco Malfoy.

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Draco stood slowly. His pale hair was singed in places, and he smelt of burnt wool and smoke. There were streaks of black soot on his face, and a smear of blood at the corner of his mouth. He looked as if he'd sat there, outside the entrance to the Gryffindor Tower, for hours.

Harry stopped short and eyed him mildly for a moment, as if nothing more consequential than a slightly scorched slug had chanced across his path. Then he brushed by with a nod and a murmured, "Malfoy," and headed for the stairs.

"Oh, bloody hell, wait!" The distress was obvious in Draco's voice, though he barely spoke above a hissed

whisper. "Potter, wait!"

Harry turned, curious, belatedly realising that if Malfoy were up here, he must have been waiting for him, but Harry was still not at all inclined to stop. The Great Hall and his friends, and especially Ginny, were drawing him urgently downstairs. "What? Why?" said Harry, walking backwards for a moment, thinking that of course it would have to be Malfoy bothering him now, of all times. "I'm in a hurry."

Draco hadn't moved from his spot by the portrait hole, and his hands were balled into fists at his sides. He looked angry, but he also looked desperate, as if his only hope in the world was walking away from him fast and that brought Harry to a reluctant stop.

"What?" said Harry, again. He hoped he didn't sound too exasperated, but on second thought he didn't much care how he sounded. The thought of Ginny running into his arms from across the crowded Great Hall, lifting her grief-stricken face to be kissed, was not making him particularly want to stand here talking to Draco sodding Malfoy.

"There's no one down there, Potter," said Draco in a low voice, as if he didn't wish to be overheard. "They've closed the castle and got everyone out. The... bodies have been moved to St Mungo's. I was already on my way up to find you when that new Minister Shacklebolt gave the order for no one to come up here and disturb you. There are a couple of Aurors waiting down there for you when you do come down."

Harry's imagined vision of Ginny waiting downstairs for him popped like a soap bubble. It took him a moment to wrap his brain around the idea of the castle being empty. It was something of a disappointment. "So what are you still doing here?" he asked, walking slowly back to where Draco stood. "Obviously, not disturbing me didn't apply to you..."

"I had to talk to you," said Draco hesitantly, ignoring Harry's sarcastic dig. "I hid for a bit to avoid the Aurors and waited up here so I didn't get turned out like everyone else." He paused and swallowed. "I want..." He hesitated again, studying Harry intently. "I need my wand back."

It suddenly occurred to Harry why he hadn't seen Lucius or Narcissa Malfoy fighting in the last battle and why he'd seen all three Malfoys simply sitting at a table in the Great Hall afterwards. None of the

Malfoys had wands. Harry remembered that Lucius's wand had been snapped when Voldemort tried to use it against Harry on the night he'd left the Dursley's. Harry himself had taken Draco's wand. And Draco had lost his mother's wand in the Room of Requirement just before the Fiendfyre had swept through, nearly claiming all their lives.

The Great Hall had been swarming with Aurors looking for any remaining Death Eaters when Harry had left. He wondered if the senior Malfoys had been arrested, and if the Aurors were looking for Draco. And that thought recalled something he'd been curious about for a long time.

Harry pulled out his own newly repaired holly wand and pointed it at Draco. "Show me your arm," he said.

Draco took a step back, and bumped up against the wall behind him. Harry advanced on Draco until his wand was only an inch away, pointed at Draco's throat. "Let's see it, then," he said, quietly. "Roll up your sleeve."

Draco's chin came up, and Harry could see that he was trembling, but he did as Harry demanded. "I wanted you to win, you know," he said sullenly, as he pulled up the left sleeve of his jumper.

"Oh, right," snorted Harry. "You're hilarious."

Draco glared at him. "Wanting you to win doesn't mean I thought you could actually do it. No one believed you could actually do it!" he retorted, unbuttoning his shirt cuff and rolling the sleeve back. "And in case it escaped your notice, most of us are not immune to the Killing Curse. Just because you don't die, doesn't mean any of the rest of us dared to flaunt any difference of opinion in front of the Dark Lord, or my lunatic aunt. Or my stupid deluded father, for that matter." His voice had lost its anger and now just sounded sad. "I wasn't even safe with my idiot best friends any more. Openly siding with you would have been an instant death sentence."

"Okay, okay," grumbled Harry, thinking suddenly of Cedric Diggory and feeling the same acute sting of guilt he always felt about that horrible senseless death. "I get it. Lumos." Harry held the lit tip of his wand over Draco's bared forearm. It was skinny and pale and unmarked.

Harry looked back up in surprise and met Draco's eyes. He'd been so sure that Malfoy had taken the Dark Mark. Draco looked every bit as surprised as Harry, if not more so. "Was it there?" asked Harry. "The Dark Mark?"

Draco nodded. His eyes were wide. "Oh, sweet Merlin," he whispered. "You did this..." Then, as if his knees had buckled under him, he slid slowly down the wall to sit on the floor.

Harry crouched down in front of him. "What do you mean, I did this? How?"

Staring intently at his own arm, Draco didn't seem to be able to take his eyes off that pale unblemished patch of skin. "He's dead, you idiot," he said softly. "You killed him and his all his spells are gone." Then he closed his eyes and smiling, let his head thump back against the wall. "I thought I'd never be free of that ghastly thing."

Harry remembered how, in the moment Dumbledore had died, he'd been released from the spell that had held him immobile on the Astronomy Tower and nodded. "I see," he said. "Right. Now there's no proof that you were one of them."

"Don't be thick, Potter," said Draco, opening his eyes to glare at Harry again. "I have my memories, they have Veritaserum. That's all the proof they need." He paused then, and a slow smirk appeared on his face. "But just so you know, before you get all set on turning me in, we've been let off. My father talked to Minister Shacklebolt already, and he's letting us go home."

Harry snorted. "Oh, that's just bloody brilliant. Your father was most definitely not on my side..."

"My father is a complete and utter arse," said Draco, breaking in and shocking Harry speechless, "who has a great vault of money he has pledged to help with restoring this school, or whatever else the Ministry wants. So save your breath, Potter. I know what my father was." He stared defiantly at Harry for a moment. "But my mother said she'd helped you," he said, continuing in an earnest voice. "She thought maybe... you would help me... and give me back my wand."

It was a long few seconds before Harry spoke. Malfoy was looking at him with hope in his eyes, one eyebrow up in question and traces of his earlier smirk still lingering at the corner of his mouth. Harry sighed. "She did help me," he said finally. "I doubt that I would be here now if it weren't for her, and I'll make sure the Ministry knows that. But she helped me because I told her you were alive and safe at the castle, and that was because I'd already fished your sorry arse out of the Fiendfyre. So I figure we're even, as favours go."

"Oh," said Draco, and his face fell. He looked down, away from Harry. "About that..."

Harry waited while Draco seemed to struggle with what he was about to say.

"... for that ...and for this," he continued slowly, indicating his now unmarked arm, and meaning also all that was implied by its disappearance, "...I wanted to say..." His voice trailed off, and he had to clear his throat before he could go on, but finally he said it, though it was somewhat mumbled at the end. "I wanted to say... thank you."

In spite of his sudden inarticulate speech, Draco sounded completely sincere. Harry hadn't even known the git could be sincere. It was disconcerting.

"And I suppose you think that makes everything all right? That I'll believe you now, and forget everything else that happened?" said Harry, a bit incredulous, thinking of Katie Bell screaming and screaming as she hung suspended in mid-air, of Ron drinking poisoned mead, and Greyback invading the corridors at Hogwarts.

Draco looked back up at him at that, his expression desperate again. "I don't expect you to care what happens to me," he said, his voice low and tense with emotion, "but I did try to help you... at the Manor... even though I was walking a very thin line then. I think, maybe, you owe me a little for that. I just want my wand back, Potter... that's all I'm asking for."

A series of other memories flashed through Harry's mind: the vision of a pale and haggard Malfoy forced to cast Crucio on Rowle, Malfoy refusing to identify Harry at the Manor, and stopping Crabbe and Goyle

from trying to kill him in the Room of Requirement, which Malfoy had done even if it wasn't with Harry's best interest in mind. He felt a little ashamed that he'd momentarily forgotten those things. Then he remembered Dumbledore's willingness to try to save Malfoy that night on the Astronomy Tower in spite of the cursed necklace and the poisoned mead and letting the Death Eaters into the school. It was the last thing the headmaster had done in life, and it weighed heavily with Harry. Still...

"I don't think I owe you anything, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. "Granted, I would have tried to save almost anyone from that horrible Fiendfyre, but the reason I came back for you was mostly because of what you did at the Manor." He paused, considering the options. "If I did give you the wand back," he asked finally, "what were your plans, after that? To just walk out of here and what... go back to Daddy and pretend none of this happened?"

"No... I don't know. I just want to go home." Draco groaned, and one hand came up to cover his face. "I just want this fucking nightmare to be over. I want my life back the way it was before that bloody snake-faced monster came back and stole everything from us."

Harry frowned. "You know that's not going to happen."

"Oh, no shit, Potter." Draco was glaring at him again, anger taking dominance over the desperation of a moment ago. "Just give me my wand back. You don't need it now." He eyed Harry's holly and phoenix feather wand that Harry was still pointing casually at him. "Or are you starting a collection? What do you have now? Three?"

"Look," said Harry, irritated, and rushing to derail that train of thought. "I'm sorry your life is fucked up. I'm sorry for a lot of things that happened that are not my fault. But the truth is I'm not sure I can give you your wand back. For one thing, it probably won't work right for you. I had a long talk with Ollivander after we rescued him from your father, and he told me that wands change allegiance if they're taken by force. It's really not your wand any more."

And I can't let him try to win it back from me so that it would work, thought Harry, coming to the most important bit, because that would make him Master of the Elder Wand again. But Harry didn't want to say that out loud. He didn't want to remind Malfoy of that.

"For another thing," he went on, thinking fast and hoping Malfoy would buy it, "I'm guessing the Ministry will want it. It's the wand that defeated Voldemort. They'll probably want to put it in a er... museum... or the Department of Mysteries... or something. Not that I want them to..." His voice trailed off. He knew it sounded incredibly lame even as he said it, but it was the best excuse he could think of to avoid giving the hawthorn wand back.

But it was too late and Draco's train of thought had not been derailed. Draco had a sly calculating look in his eye and his hand darted out to hover over Harry's holly wand. "I heard what you said in the Great Hall this morning - that I was Master of the Elder Wand all that time. Maybe I don't need that old hawthorn wand back. If I grabbed this wand away from you right now, wouldn't I be Master of the Elder Wand again?"

Harry had always had good reflexes, most likely from a childhood of dodging Dudley's blows, but a year on the run had made those reflexes lightening quick. He was on his feet with his wand pointed at Draco's nose before the git had even finished his sentence. "Don't even think about it," he said flatly.

Draco looked up at Harry for a few intense seconds before his hand fell to the floor at his side. Then he closed his eyes and let his head drop back against the wall, defeat written clearly all over his face.

In those few seconds, though, Harry had seen the small spark of hope, that spark that had lit Draco's eyes earlier, fade and die. And he found he didn't like that. Not at all.

Harry remembered vividly how bereft he'd felt when his holly wand was broken. It had felt as if a part of his own body was missing. He could certainly understand why Malfoy wanted the hawthorn wand back. And worse, ever since he'd mentioned the Fiendfyre a few minutes ago, he couldn't stop the realisation that Malfoy was only here, alive and speaking and... well... still here at all, because Harry had made an effort and saved him from being horribly burned to death. And maybe, supplied a little niggling voice in Harry's mind, just maybe, he should follow that up by at least making an effort to be civil.

"C'mon, get up," said Harry, his voice softer, tempered now by guilt. God, why was it that Malfoy could get under his skin like this, every single time. He felt like he'd just kicked a wounded puppy.

Draco scrambled up, and Harry could see that, though he tried to stand and face Harry with his earlier

confidence, the bravado was obviously false: he was trembling and had to keep one hand against the wall to brace himself. He didn't meet Harry's eyes, instead he turned his face away, and as close as Harry was now, he could see the faint tracks of earlier tears running through the soot and blood on Draco's face.

It was probably those bloody tear tracks that did Harry in, that made his heart turn over, just the smallest bit.

Harry understood in a flash of insight that all Malfoy had ever known of power was the kind that took and showed no mercy, that forced its will on those who were weaker and sought to destroy any opposition. There was nothing in Malfoy's experience that had taught him the power of benevolence, or cooperation, of sharing, or compassion. He'd been taught to ridicule those qualities as weaknesses. And Harry understood that all Malfoy expected from Harry, now that Harry was in a position of power, was the same cruel brutality he'd known before. But Harry was not going to go along with it. Damn it all to hell, he was not going to act like Voldemort all over again, not even with Malfoy.

And suddenly that compassion Harry'd thought of a moment ago as only an abstract idea became a living breathing and solid presence in his gut. Malfoy had come to him here, asking for help, and Harry had treated him with nothing but distrust. It didn't matter if part of him believed Malfoy deserved that distrust. Malfoy had been the victim of his father's deluded ambitions, and of Voldemort's vindictive egomania, as much as anyone. Harry just hadn't seen it quite that way before.

And now that he had seen it, it couldn't be unseen. Harry's heart made a choice then and there, and he wondered in that split second, if he would come sooner or later to regret it. But that didn't change his decision at all.

"Malfoy," he said, trying to make his voice both stern and gentle, "can you promise me that you will never, ever, fight me again? Can you swear, by whatever you hold dear, that you will never, for the rest of your life, try to best me in a duel?"

"What difference does it make, Potter," whispered Draco, "if I don't have a wand. But if you must know, I hope I don't ever have to fight anyone in a duel, ever again, for as long as I live. I've had enough of it. Will that do?"

Draco was extraordinarily pale and looked ready to sink back to the floor. Harry abruptly thought of another reason, besides his own very scary and intimidating presence, why that might be. "When was the last time you ate something?" he asked, concern suddenly overriding everything else.

"No idea... maybe yesterday morning..."

Harry sent a mental apology to Ginny, wherever she was. The thought came back to him, that he and Ginny would have time, lots of time, later. Right now, it seemed he was stuck dealing with a nearly fainting Draco Malfoy.

Harry turned to the Fat Lady and said, "Let me back in. You know I don't know the password. I need to get him inside."

The Fat Lady in the portrait was nodding and beaming at him, all set to open up, but at the word "him," gave a little shriek. "Oh, no!" she cried, her hands fluttering nervously around her face. "Harry, love, you can't bring him in here!"

Harry's eyes rolled up to the ceiling. This was too much. He was Harry Potter, he'd just killed Voldemort, and he needed the sandwiches and the hawthorn wand from his room. He was not going to be thwarted by a bloody over-protective painting. He stuck a finger right up to her painted face. "The war is over," he said, heatedly. "Now OPEN UP!"

It was not the password, but he was Harry Potter, and he'd just killed Voldemort, and she obeyed him with only one small squeak of protest.

So much for not using power to push people around, he thought ruefully, as he let Draco climb in through the portrait hole. But if he had anything to say about it, then all the fighting was going to stop. He was going to stop it right here and now with Malfoy, for starters.

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With a flick of his wand, Harry lit a fire for light in the dark Gryffindor common room. "I'll be right back," he told Draco, then sprinted up the stairs. He got to the first floor landing, stopped and called down, "Hey, the loo is up here on the first landing. If you want to get cleaned up, or anything." He didn't wait for a response, but ran up the rest of the way to his dorm room.

Now that everyone was out of the castle, he knew he wasn't going to be coming back here. He gathered all his things from his old room, the moleskin bag, the two wands that were his but not his, and the Invisibility Cloak, then straightened the bedclothes on his bed. This room had been home to him for six years. It felt odd, knowing he might never see it again. He stood for several moments, just looking around, memorising and remembering, then with a deep breath, walked away from this old life toward the new one opening up before him - the one he hadn't been sure would ever happen. On the way out, he picked up the plate of sandwiches.

Draco was in the common room when Harry came back down, sitting in the armchair next to the fire. His face was cleaner and his hair was wet; it looked like he'd put his entire head under the tap. He practically leapt onto the plate of sandwiches when Harry held it out to him, scoffing down the first sandwich in three bites. Two more followed in quick succession, and Harry was vastly amused by the fact that he was feeding Draco Malfoy sandwiches in the Gryffindor common room. It went against all the natural laws of the universe.

"How is it you have sandwiches in here?" Draco complained, between bites. "There's not a soul in the castle, and yet you have sandwiches. I probably shouldn't be so surprised."

Harry snorted back a laugh at the thought of calling Kreacher and giving Malfoy a real surprise. He laid the hawthorn wand on the table next to Draco instead. "Maybe this will surprise you, as well," he said. "I can't promise it will still work for you, but I'm giving it back."

If Harry had expected Draco to grab the wand immediately, it was his turn to be surprised. Draco just sat very still and stared at it. Then he lifted his chin and stared at Harry. And Harry couldn't fight the grin that took over his mouth because that spark of hope was back in Malfoy's eyes.

"Just like that?" asked Draco in an unsteady voice. "No catch?"

"Just like that," affirmed Harry. "Although, if you remember, you did promise not to duel with me ever again."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Like I was going to do that, anyway, Potter, after you killed the fucking Dark Lord with an Expelliarmus. I'm not stupid."

"I never thought you were stupid, Malfoy. I think some of the choices you made were stupid..."

"Oh, right, choices," retorted Draco, waving a sandwich. Eating seemed to have effected an instant revival of his attitude. "My father was in Azkaban, and my aunt let the Dark Lord live in my house. My mother's life was threatened. Exactly what kind of choices do you think I had?"

"No, okay, maybe you didn't have much choice, really," said Harry, sitting down in the chair across from Draco. "But I always thought you were proud of it, of being with him and taking the Dark Mark. On the train to school, at the start of Sixth Year, you certainly seemed to be."

"Yeah, well things didn't turn out the way I thought they would, did they?" Malfoy finished the sandwich he was holding, then went on in a low voice, his eyes fixed firmly on the fire. "At first, I was still outraged that they'd dared put my father in prison. I was blinded by that and didn't know what I was getting myself into. My father had always talked about how brilliant the Dark Lord was. How we were going to be his most powerful partners. I wanted to do anything to hold on to that for us while my father was gone." Draco took a deep breath, then looked back at Harry. "But it turned out that the Dark Lord was a monster, and then it was more about just staying alive from one day to the next," he said. "He was deranged and inhuman and cruel, even to his followers."

Harry nodded. "That's why he had to be stopped."

They stared at each other for several long seconds until Draco said quietly, "In the end, I wanted him

stopped as much as you did." He looked back at the hawthorn wand. "But," he said, pausing, and slowly reaching out to pick it up, "what really is insane is that you did it with this. With this old wand that I've been carrying around since I was eleven. It's like..." He sat for a moment, silently running his fingers up and down the wand before he continued. "...like it knew how much I wanted to kill the Dark Lord, but wouldn't ever dare, and it found a way to do it... with you."

Harry sat up straighter. This was the very thing that fascinated him too, after talking to Ollivander, after his experiences with the different wands. Harry had been so frustrated with Hermione's refusal to acknowledge that the wands had some kind of innate magic. Suddenly Harry had all kinds of questions. He realised he'd wanted to talk to Malfoy for ages, to know what had happened, what he'd been thinking. He thought of Ginny and again reminded himself that they had lots of time to be together in the future. Malfoy was here now, and in a talking mood evidently, and Harry wanted to take advantage of that. The world was just going to have to think he was still taking an extremely long nap...

Harry really wanted to discuss the theories of wandlore with Malfoy, but the first question that popped out of his mouth was something entirely different. It was something he'd been wondering about for a while. "So why didn't you identify me at the Manor when you obviously knew it was me."

Draco shrugged. "I hated the Dark Lord being in the house. I didn't want him to come back for any reason." He looked up at Harry, his eyebrows drawn down in seriousness. "And of course he was furious with us that you escaped. Exactly what I was afraid would happen." He shuddered, and Harry saw a shifting expression of pain and revulsion flit across his face at the memory.

"So nothing to do with me, personally, then?" said Harry with a half-grin, realising with surprise that he was teasing Malfoy, and there was no animosity behind it. "You weren't really trying to help me at all, like you claimed earlier?"

Draco looked caught out and Harry was mildly amused to see his cheeks go slightly pink.

Then Draco's head tipped back against the chair and he let his breath out in a huff. "Potter," he said in a strained voice, "I helped you because if anyone had a chance of defeating the Dark Lord, it was you. I would have done anything..." He raised his head and looked pointedly at Harry. "...anything, that is, that didn't involve me fighting him myself, to get rid of him."

"Hmm," said Harry. "But if you thought I was the only chance of defeating him, then why were you helping Crabbe and Goyle try to capture me to hand over to him?"

Draco took a deep breath and shook his head. "Look, there's no way I'm going to be able to give you reasons that you will like for everything I did. Mostly, I was doing whatever I could to survive, and for us, since my father had involved us so deeply, survival with the Dark Lord meant pleasing him and giving him what he wanted, not just staying out of his way."

"It just seems like you and your family want to be on whatever side you think is winning, or that has the most power, regardless of what is involved. I saw you sucking up to both sides during the battle - just in case."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I find that morally reprehensible."

"Big words, Potter. I'm impressed." Draco paused and looked away and stared for a moment into the fire. "The truth is, I didn't know what side I was on, really. My own side, maybe? So, yeah, I did whatever I had to, whatever would keep me or my parents safe for that moment." He paused again. "You have no idea what it was like..." he added so softly that Harry barely heard him.

"Yeah, actually I do," said Harry quietly. "And I guess I can understand that. I did some things out of desperation this year that I'm not proud of."

Draco turned back and studied Harry intently, and Harry met his eyes steadily.

"And I wished more than anything that I didn't have to fight him myself, too," said Harry quietly. "I wasn't so sure of my chances."

A feeling of understanding seemed to pass between them, then, and Draco nodded once. "So no glory or quest for power and fame for you?" he asked.

"Hardly," said Harry, and was gratified when Draco nodded again.

"Ah. Then, as I always suspected, it was your immense, overbearing, albeit selfless and heroic need to fight evil and save the world," said Draco, looking altogether pleased with himself at turning the tables and smugly daring Harry to deny it.

Harry had to admit that he'd set himself up for that one. "You wanker," he said, making sure his voice was teasing, giving Malfoy a crooked grin to let him know he got the joke on himself.

Draco's eyebrows shot up, then his eyes narrowed, and the corner of his mouth curled up into his old smirk. He gave a short snort. "Am not," he said. Then he did grin. "Well, not bloody lately."

Harry couldn't help it. He laughed out loud. Malfoy was grinning back at him openly now. They weren't fighting and it felt fantastic.

In fact, Harry was surprised to find that he was honestly enjoying this conversation. They had been through so much, had had so many parallel and shared experiences, and yet had never talked to each other. The prospect of being able to talk about them now was riveting. Harry knew he needed to go soon, but he found he didn't want to. There were things he wanted to know, things he was discovering that he wanted to talk to Malfoy about, like the wands. And speaking of wands...

"You should try that," said Harry, indicating the hawthorn wand that Draco held in his lap. "See if it still works for you."

Draco looked down at the wand in his hand, his expression serious again. He held it up and studied it intently for a second, then said, "Lumos." The tip of the wand glowed blue and it cast a small circle of light. "It does feel a bit different," he said, "but it works. I'll just have to get used to it, won't I? Or it will

have to get used to me." He ended the spell, and tucked the wand up into his sleeve with a satisfied nod, then raised one eyebrow at Harry. "It's not like I can get another one... unlike some people I know." Then he sat forward, avid interest in his eyes. "Will you let me see it? The Elder Wand, I mean."

"I don't know," said Harry hesitantly, suddenly uncomfortable. The less said about the Elder Wand, in his opinion, the better. He stared back at Draco who was still looking at him expectantly. "I'd rather not," he said finally.

Draco sat back, looking disappointed, but not surprised. "Fine," he said, softly, sounding more let down than angry.

But before Harry could reply, the door to the common room opened and Professor McGonagall walked in, followed by two Aurors in uniform. "I will check on him," she was saying fiercely, "but I will not wake him if he's still sleeping. He deserves all the time he needs..." Then she stopped so suddenly that the Aurors nearly walked into her when she saw Harry and Draco sitting by the fire.

Harry stood up, and Draco stood up behind him.

"Potter?" said McGonagall, and her eyes flicked over his shoulder to Draco and then back. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," said Harry. "We were just about to come down."

"Isn't that the Malfoy boy?" asked one of the Aurors. "He's supposed to be with his parents. Minister Shacklebolt placed them under house arrest until further notice."

Harry turned around. "Forgot to mention that little detail, didn't you," he said in a low voice, feeling much better now about Shacklebolt's decision to let the Malfoys "go home."

Draco just shrugged and smirked at him. "It's just temporary," he whispered back. Then he stepped past

Harry and faced the Aurors and Professor McGonagall. "I've been up here with Potter the whole time," he announced. "It was my wand, you know, that he used to kill the Dark Lord."

Harry supposed he didn't mind the truth-stretching. He thought he could see through Malfoy's posturing now, to the fact that he often responded to fear and insecurity with this kind of pumped-up bravado.

McGonagall was frowning at Draco, but one of the Aurors stepped forward and motioned to Draco to come through. "Well, you're coming with me now," he said sternly. "I'll be seeing you get back home straight away."

Harry supposed that he, himself, was now going to be someone Malfoy would try to ally with, to be important. Obviously, Malfoy still thought being important, or at least knowing the "right" people, was important. He was a little disappointed to think that that's all that had happened between them here this afternoon - that Malfoy was still siding with anyone who could further his position in life. Really, he chided himself, he should have known...

And then Draco turned around to face him, with his back to the Aurors, and that genuinely sincere expression was back on his face, the one that Harry had never seen before today, the one that somehow reached straight into Harry's heart and snagged him against all sense. "Potter," he said softly, meeting Harry's eyes with open honesty. "Thank you." He patted his arm where the wand was now safely hidden inside his sleeve, and nodded once. Then without waiting for a reply, he turned and walked away with most of his old swagger intact, going out through the portrait hole with the Auror.

Harry wondered if he would ever see him again.

"If you're ready, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, "Auror..." She turned to face the man in question, waiting for him to answer her implied question.

"Oh," he said, straightening up. "It's Thompson, Ma'am."

"... Auror Thompson will escort you to the Burrow. They are expecting you."

"Okay," said Harry, as he gathered up his few belongings, "but there's something I need to do first." He hesitated, then deciding he needed her help, asked, "Professor McGonagall, may I speak with you a moment... privately."

"Of course, Potter," she said, smiling at him. "Just give us a moment, would you please, Auror Thompson," she said graciously, while ushering the Auror to the portrait hole. "I assure you, Potter will be quite safe with me." After the portrait had closed, she hurried back to Harry. She looked worried. "Potter, is something wrong?" she asked. "And what was Draco Malfoy doing in here?"

"Doesn't matter," he said. "We were only talking. What matters is this." He drew the Elder Wand from where it was bundled up in his Invisibility Cloak.

"That is Dumbledore's wand," she said, puzzled. "How...?" Then comprehension hit and she sank into the chair that Harry had been sitting in earlier. "That is the Elder Wand, isn't it? The wand you won from Voldemort..."

"Who took it from Dumbledore's tomb, yes," affirmed Harry. "I want to put it back there where it will be safe. I don't want to keep it."

"Oh, but Potter, you can't do that," she said. "It won't be safe there at all. The tomb is completely broken apart. We had to move the headmaster's body. It was left exposed... We all wondered what had happened."

"Bloody hell," said Harry before he could stop himself. Of course, it was broken. He'd known that, had seen it happen, but had completely forgotten the vision he'd experienced through his connection with Voldemort's mind. "I'm sorry, Professor," he added, for his language.

She waved his apology away. "My thoughts exactly," she said wryly. "The thought of Voldemort here on the school grounds..."

Harry nodded absently; he was thinking hard. There had to be somewhere else to put the wand; some safe place in the castle; he did not want to carry it around with him. The Room of Hidden Things had been destroyed in the Fiendfyre so that was no longer a possibility. Then a memory and an inspiration came to him. "Dumbledore's portrait," he said out loud.

"Potter, you can't put the wand into a painting," said McGonagall.

"No," said Harry, "but there's a secret vault behind the painting. We can put it in there."

"I'm not going to ask you how you know that, Potter," said McGonagall. "Dumbledore seems to have told you a great deal that he didn't share with the rest of us."

"Actually, it was Professor Snape that told me about it... in a way. But that's a long story. Do you agree that I can leave it there? I don't want to take it with me. It's too dangerous."

"Yes, all right." She stood up. "That seems a fitting place for it, until the tomb can be properly restored."

Harry had to fight down the urge to hug her. He gave her a wide smile instead. "Thank you, Professor."

She looked at him fondly for a moment, smiling back. "If I may make a suggestion..." At Harry's nod, she continued. "I'm assuming that the fewer people who know the whereabouts of this wand the better?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Then, if you will entrust the wand to me, it will save time and we will not need to make needless explanations to Auror Thompson out there. You can go on ahead to the Weasleys' and I'll make sure the wand is safely hidden in the vault. That is, I'm assuming Dumbledore's portrait can help me locate and open it..."

"He definitely can," said Harry, beaming at her. "Thank you! There's no one I would trust it with more than you, Professor."

McGonagall pulled a large handkerchief from her pocket and Harry placed the Elder Wand into her hands. She wrapped it carefully and hid it in her robes. "There now," she said. "I'll contact you by owl when the repairs are made to the tomb. I know you'll want to see it replaced properly then."

Feeling immensely lighter now that the responsibility of the Elder Wand was lifted from him, Harry gave in to his earlier urge and swept McGonagall into a hug. "Thank you so much, Professor," he said. "You have no idea how much better I feel knowing I don't have to carry that thing around with me."

"Oh, go on, now, out with you," she exclaimed, shooing him toward the portrait hole. "I'll take care of this straight away, and you're not to worry about it."

Though she sounded like her usual stern self, Harry saw that her expression was pleased and he knew that she had been touched by his unexpected hug. He grinned back at her as he stepped through the portrait hole.

Auror Thompson was waiting for him in the corridor. "Mr Potter," he said formally. "Minister Shacklebolt asked me to report to you and to accompany you to the Burrow. You are to have round-the-clock protection until the three most dangerous remaining Death Eaters have been found and arrested."

"Oh?" said Harry, as they started down the stairs together. Behind him he caught a glimpse of Professor McGonagall leaving the common room and heading for the stairs up to the headmaster's office. He turned his attention back to Auror Thompson. "Who escaped?"

"Yaxley, Macnair, and Rookwood," replied Thompson. "Until we're sure there's no threat of reprisal from them, Minister Shacklebolt wants you kept under guard."

"I saw all three of them fall in the Great Hall during the last battle," said Harry, keeping pace with the Auror as they continued down the stairs to the Entrance Hall. "They were all unconscious or knocked

down when I started the duel with Voldemort. What happened to them?"

"It's difficult to know," said Thompson, "but at least one of them must have regained consciousness while everyone was focussed on you and the Dark Lord. It's our hypothesis that this one cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself and the others and they slipped out and escaped during the confusion and celebration that followed your victory. We believe it must have been an unusually powerful Disillusionment Charm, since they were not detected. In any case, their bodies were not found in the Great Hall. We have to assume they are alive and at large until we can ascertain otherwise."

"I see," said Harry, with a sigh. He'd been so sure those men had been defeated and caught.

They had reached the entrance doors and Thompson looked at him with sympathy as he held the door open for Harry. "We'll get them, Mr Potter, don't you worry. You've done your bit." Then he grinned. "And a great bit that was, too. One for the history books, that was."

"Er... right," said Harry, but he smiled back, and stepped out into the cool spring evening. He took a deep breath, and the air was crisp and clean and refreshing. The thought of Ginny came to his mind and he smiled wider. He would be seeing her, finally, in a few minutes...

They walked in silence the rest of the way to the gates, then Harry took hold of Thompson's wrist and let him Apparate them both to the Burrow.

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Lying in bed much later that night, Harry studied the canopy over his head without really seeing it. The events of the afternoon and evening kept replaying in his mind, and he was puzzling over why nothing had quite turned out the way he'd expected. He was back now at Grimmauld Place, trying to sleep for the first time in the master bedroom on the third floor, which Kreacher had cleaned and fixed up for him. Now that he was back for good, he'd felt disinclined to stay in Sirius's old room, with all of Sirius's old posters and memories.

Two Aurors stood on guard in the street outside the house, and would remain there on Shacklebolt's orders until further notice.

Hermione and Ron were in their old rooms on the floor below, having agreed to come back with him so that he was not alone in the place tonight. But after Fred's funeral tomorrow, they were planning to leave for Australia to find Hermione's parents.

Harry suspected they might actually be sharing a room down there, but he didn't care and didn't want to think about that too closely. Especially not after what had happened with Ginny tonight. For in spite of his friends' company downstairs, Harry thought he had never felt so alone.

The first unexpected occurrence of the afternoon, of course, had been Malfoy. And although their meeting had been a bit surreal, Harry was actually very glad that it had happened. He wasn't sure if he'd ever cross paths with Malfoy again, so it was good that they had at least come to some kind of peace with their past. Harry still might not be able to agree with all of Malfoy's actions, but he now had a mostly acceptable understanding of why he'd done what he'd done, at least according to Malfoy's admittedly convoluted logic.

Learning of the escape of three of the most dangerous Death Eaters had also been unexpected. Harry could only hope that that situation would be resolved very soon, especially since Yaxley had been the reason they'd had to abandon the house at Grimmauld Place after the incident at the Ministry. Harry'd had a long conversation with Shacklebolt at the Burrow and had been informed of the steps being taken to locate the escaped men. Shacklebolt had already sent a team to search the house and had Aurors stationed outside Grimmauld Place, anticipating that Harry would want to return there. There was no question that the original Fidelius Charm was so diluted as to be useless, and had in fact most likely faded out of existence. Shacklebolt assured Harry, however, that his home would be put under the tightest security possible, until Harry could decide if he should create a new Fidelius Charm and Secret Keeper.

Harry had also taken that opportunity to fulfil his promise to Malfoy to tell Shacklebolt the details of how Narcissa Malfoy had helped him in the Forbidden Forest. To be fair, he'd also mentioned Draco's more self-interested attempts to help him as well, and Shacklebolt had assured Harry that he would personally see that those actions were taken into account when the Malfoys' case was investigated. "Lucius Malfoy has offered the Ministry an extensive sum of money for whatever repairs are required," Shacklebolt had

told him. "And as much as it pains me to say it, I believe that offer will be accepted, and he'll buy his way out of another prison term in Azkaban and simply serve an extended sentence under house arrest."

But, the real puzzle had been Ginny. Harry had expected her to be sad and to be grieving for Fred. He had not expected her to avoid him and refuse his attempts to comfort her.

He'd arrived at the Burrow to find the house filled with people. Friends and family were all there waiting for him. Hermione must have been keeping a watchful eye on the door, because she was the first to see him and she'd launched herself at him with a squeal of relief. Ron had thumped him so hard on the back that Harry had nearly fallen over. Then he'd been hugged within an inch of his life by nearly everyone else. Everyone, that is, except the one he'd been anticipating holding in his arms all afternoon. She had watched him from a distance, but seemed to melt away whenever Harry tried to make his way to her.

An enormous amount of food was spread like a feast on the table in the kitchen, and everyone helped themselves, taking heaping plates into the other rooms or into the lantern-lit back garden as they stood and talked in small quiet groups. The mood was both celebratory and solemn in respect for missing loved ones, especially Fred.

Hermione showed Harry the Daily Prophet from that morning. Blazoned across the front page was the enormous headline: HARRY POTTER DEFEATS DARK LORD! Under it was a huge picture of Harry. Harry gave a soft snort and shook his head. It was the same photograph they'd used when he'd been wanted for questioning about Dumbledore's death. Harry was grateful that no one had been hounding him yet for a new one. He probably had Kingsley to thank for that.

With Ron's help, Harry had gathered all the Weasleys together and privately told them his dream. He limited his story to his conversation with Fred, omitting any description of the place where he'd been before when he'd died, and how he had seen all the dead from the last battle there. Ginny had listened with her eyes down and her face turned partly away, and it was with a lump in his throat that Harry had told them about the tranz-plant offer Fred had made of his ear. Molly had gone all teary-eyed, saying, "That sounds just like what he would have said," and Arthur had looked amazed and said, "I did tell him about those Muggle tranz-plants. Imagine that he remembered that!" George gave in after a moment and grinned for a second or two. Some of the sparkle seemed to come back into his eyes after that. Ron had thumped Harry again, with a quietly sniffled, "Thanks, mate."

When Ginny slipped away from the family group, Harry followed her to a bench at the foot of the garden. She sat down, and he sat beside her, uncertain if he should touch her or not, so he didn't. "Gin," he said gently, the lump still in his throat. "Please talk to me. I've waited all year to be back with you, and now..." He paused and took a deep breath. "I don't understand what's wrong."

"You were dead," she whispered. "We all saw it. I can't get it out of my mind."

"But I wasn't dead," said Harry. "I pretended to be so that Voldemort didn't fight me before his snake was killed..." He trailed off, because she was looking at him now and there was hurt and anger in her eyes.

"You pretended? You deliberately let us all be shocked like that?"

The last few words came out on a stifled sob, and Harry reached out and took her hand. "It wasn't something I planned and I certainly didn't want to shock you," he said softly. "I hated knowing that you all believed I was dead, but you have to understand. There wasn't anything else I could do."

"I am trying to understand, Harry." She swiped at her eyes with her free hand. "I had just found out that Fred was gone... and then we thought you were dead, too. I can't seem to forget seeing you there in Hagrid's arms and how... how horrible it felt. It was like everything died."

Harry put his arm around her and gently pulled her close. "Hey," he said, "I'm here now. Alive and well." She sighed and nodded and laid her head on his shoulder. Harry rested his chin against her sweet-smelling hair and tried to believe that they could go back to those wonderful days at the end of Sixth Year, before he'd broken up with her.

But that fantasy didn't last long. After a moment, she pulled away and sat up. "I think I'm a bit angry with you, too," she said in a low voice. "For taking sides with Mum in that argument..."

"I'm sorry?" said Harry, completely lost. "What argument?"

"In the Room of Requirement, before the final battle started," she reminded him. "She wanted me to go home, and I looked at you for help and you sided with her. You, more than anyone, knew how competent I was in the DA, how I fought with you at the Department of Mysteries. I wanted to fight! That's what we had been practicing for!"

"Of course, I sided with her," protested Harry. "I wanted you to be safe too!"

She looked up at him. "But that's just it, Harry. I don't want to be kept safe. I wanted to be involved. I wanted to help. All I ever got to do was be second to my brother and Hermione. They got to have all the fun, while I was stuck here or at school doing nothing!"

"Trust me, Ginny," said Harry, remembering flashes of their harrowing adventures. "None of it was fun."

"Well, then I wanted to be not having fun with you, too."

Harry sighed. "You know that sounds just a bit ridiculous, don't you?"

"Does it?" she said, softly. She stood up. "Maybe I just wanted you to believe in me," she said, not meeting his eyes. "I've had to live all this year knowing you might be killed at any moment. It's not fair for you to ask me to accept your being in danger, but then want to lock me up like something fragile so you don't have to be worried yourself. Besides, I'm not like that."

"I know you're not..." started Harry, but he didn't know what else to say. She was right, put that way, it wasn't fair, but that was the only way it could have been for him.

"Look, it's been a long day," said Ginny. Her hand slipped away from Harry's grasp. "I'll see you at Fred's funeral tomorrow, okay?"

"Yes," said Harry. "I'll be there, of course, but..." She was gone, her red hair flashing brilliant for a second in the light of the lantern over the back door, and Harry had not even kissed her.

"Just give her time," Hermione had said, when he'd come in.

Lying in bed now, he sighed again. Of course, he would give her time. What else was he going to do? He could understand her frustration with not being allowed to fight. He'd felt the same way - angry and frustrated - most of Fifth Year. But why couldn't Ginny understand that the last thing he'd wanted was for her to be there, risking her life with him. He'd barely been able to stand that Hermione and Ron had been there. Why couldn't she understand how much he had needed her to be safe, to be that one sure, bright, wonderful thing he could cling to for hope in all the madness?

That kiss, the one she had given him in her bedroom as a birthday present, had been in the back of his mind all year. It had kept him going, kept alive a spark of hope during all the dark, grim days, of something good and pure waiting for him when it was over. Some days, it was all he could imagine of the future - seeing Ginny, kissing her again. Was it so much to ask, after everything he'd been through, that she would be waiting to run into his arms and kiss him the way he'd imagined so many times?

He stared unseeing at the canopy above him and wondered when he would ever stop having to wait for the things he wanted.

No, nothing had turned out quite the way he'd expected. Unbidden, the memory of Malfoy's face came to his mind, that last unguarded sincere expression he'd seen before Malfoy left the Gryffindor common room. Without realising it, Harry smiled, and finally closed his eyes and slept.

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This time, the Waiting Place looked more like the vaulted nave of a cathedral than King's Cross station.

Harry stood barefoot and white-robed in the swirling, shining mist and looked around in disbelief at the high arched ceilings and stained glass windows. Why on earth was he here again?

He took a few steps forwards and as the mist cleared away somewhat, thought he could make out a single figure sitting on a bench at the far end of the nave. It was with a feeling of dread that he made his way toward that lone figure, extremely reluctant to find out who it was that had died now.

But when Harry came up beside her, it was no one he knew. It was a little old witch with a sweet, round, wrinkled face, her head bowed in prayer, her hair pinned up in a bun that was coming undone around her face in white wisps. "Er..." said Harry, just above a whisper. "Hello?"

She looked up at him and the bright blue eyes went huge in the little wrinkled face. "Mr Potter?!" she gasped. "Oh, my goodness! It's really you, isn't it? Harry Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, quite startled. "I'm me, I mean yes, I'm Harry Potter..."

She stood and placed one hand on his arm. "I'm Agatha Bell, dear. My granddaughter, Katie, knew you at Hogwarts. She always spoke so well of you, you know." Then she leaned close and whispered, "I know I'm dead, so you don't have to worry if that's why you're here. To tell me that, I mean."

Harry smiled. "I really don't know why I'm here," he whispered back. "But I'm pleased to meet you."

She beamed at him. "Oh, if I'd known I was going to meet Harry Potter when I died, I wouldn't have worried about it so much."

Harry barely stifled a groan. He remembered what Dumbledore had said when they'd met here, that it was his party. That would mean this must be Agatha's party this time. "So what do you think happens now?" he asked, relieved that he didn't need to be in charge.

"Oh," she said, tipping her head thoughtfully to one side, "I think I'm meant to climb those stairs over

there. It's funny. I didn't see them until just now..."

Turning, Harry could now see a column of light that contained a winding stair at the centre of the immense space. He was sure it hadn't been there a moment ago. Nodding, he stepped aside so she could walk past him. "That must be it," he said. "I'll just wait here to be sure you get along okay, yeah?"

"Yes, thank you, dear," she said in a hushed voice. "Isn't it beautiful?" She took a few steps towards the stairs, then turned back to face Harry. "There's something else I need to tell you," she said slowly, "and I've just remembered. Maybe that is why you're here..."

"Oh?" said Harry.

"It's about that boy. The one who gave my Katie that horrible necklace. I don't think I can go up those stairs until I tell you that I've forgiven him. Somehow, I know now that it was an accident. I know he was in trouble and didn't mean for it to hurt her." She paused and looked at Harry with pleading blue eyes. "Will you tell him that for me, if you see him?"

Harry felt rooted to the spot in shock. "Yes," he finally managed to say. "Yes, if I see him again, I'll tell him."

She smiled at him then, as if all the burdens of the world had been spirited away. With a soft, "Thank you, dear," she went forward into the light and stepped up on the stairs, and they moved, spiralling up like the ones in Dumbledore's office, lifting her out of sight.

Harry took a few steps back and sank down onto the bench, astonished. After a few seconds, the mist swirled down and everything dissolved into white and disappeared.

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When Harry came down to the kitchen the next morning, Ron and Hermione were already there, and Kreacher was fixing a breakfast that might have easily served ten. Well, four or five, if one took Ron's appetite into account. Harry felt ravenous enough this morning to give him some competition.

"Good morning, Master Harry!" said Kreacher, in his deep croaking voice. "Breakfast is already on the table, please help yourself to whatever you like."

"Thank you, Kreacher," said Harry. The kitchen looked just as he'd left it that morning, so many months ago, when they'd set out to get the locket from Dolores Umbridge at the Ministry and had been prevented from coming back. The fire crackled cheerily in the hearth, the pots gleamed brightly on their racks overhead, and the table was laden with shining plates and delicious food. It was wonderful to be back. "And Kreacher," said Harry, hurriedly piling his plate with toast before Ron could eat it all. "I didn't have the chance to say this yesterday, but I saw what you did at Hogwarts during the last battle. You were amazing!"

Kreacher came around the table and bowed low before Harry. "Thank you, Master Harry. And may I say the same to you." There was a definite smile on the old elf's wrinkled face. "Kreacher is very proud now to have Harry Potter as his master."

"Oh," said Harry, unexpectedly touched. "I am very proud of you, too, Kreacher," he said, only a little surprised to find that it was perfectly true. He glanced over at Hermione and saw that she was smiling at him. He smiled back, thankful to have finally earned her approval on the proper treatment of house-elves.

"Master Harry would perhaps like to celebrate his victory with a special steak and kidney pie?" asked Kreacher. He seemed quite hopeful.

It wasn't what Harry would normally like for breakfast, but he was all set to accept when he caught sight of Hermione and Ron both mouthing silently but emphatically NO. And suddenly he had a terrible suspicion. "Er...that wouldn't be the same steak and kidney pie you made the night we didn't come back for dinner, would it, Kreacher?"

"Ha," croaked Kreacher. "Master Harry is being funny." But no more mention of the questionable pie was made after that.

The rest of breakfast was simply a quiet, luxurious feast. After months of camping and barely knowing when or where they would eat, it was heaven to sit and eat to their hearts' content in peace. The splendid quality of the morning was only spoiled for Harry by having to pretend not to notice how Ron and Hermione were looking at each other. He knew they were trying hard not to be obvious, but Hermione had a glowing, besotted smile on her face, and kept glancing at Ron. Ron looked over the moon, and Harry guessed that wasn't far off. He had a hard time not resenting the fact that he should have been with someone too.

His discontent must have shown on his face, because eventually Hermione leaned across the table and put her hand on his arm. "She'll come around, Harry," she said. "I'm sure it'll just be a matter of time."

Ron, whose mouth was stuffed with eggs at that moment, nodded in agreement. "Mad'r o' dime," he said knowingly.

Harry looked down at his plate and shrugged. He was still hopeful, but unconvinced. He pushed a piece of bacon around on his plate, thinking about Ginny. For several minutes, he was quite lost in the memory of the last kiss they'd shared so many months ago, and then was drifting off into the fantasy of that imagined kiss, the one that had never happened....

"You haven't had any more dreams of dead people, have you Harry?" asked Hermione, nosey as ever.

Startled from his reverie, Harry looked up to find both Hermione and Ron watching him. "Er, no," he lied. They were leaving later this morning to find Hermione's parents in Australia and Harry was absolutely not going to worry them about this strange dream-thing he was experiencing. If it were still happening by the time they got back, he reasoned, he could worry them about it then. He picked up the slice of bacon and popped it in his mouth. "No," he said again, when he saw they were still watching. "I'm fine. No dead people."

But when they went upstairs to get dressed for the funeral, Harry gave Kreacher ten Knuts and sent him to get a copy of the Daily Prophet. And really, he thought, once he'd read the neat little obituary for Agatha Elisabeth Bell, age 97, died peacefully in her sleep, he shouldn't have been so shocked to find it.

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Fred's funeral was not a dull and dismal affair. George had gone all out to celebrate his twin's life. The small cemetery at Ottery St Catchpole was decorated with bright banners that proclaimed FRED IS DEAD BUT HIS SPIRIT LIVES ON, and streaming multi-coloured fireworks launched sprays of glittering sparks overhead. Each of the family gave a short eulogy, many of which consisted of funny memories of Fred's childhood escapades. There were both laughter and tears in abundance.

"I'm making sure he doesn't come back to haunt me, Harry," said George when he stood up to speak. "I'll just have to get in enough trouble for both of us. But I draw the line at that tranz-plant business. I'm not having some Muggle stitch Fred's mouldy ear on me, thank you very much. I intend to keep my head holey."

Ginny stood by Harry's side through it all, and even let him hold her hand. She smiled at him a couple of times through her tears, too, but Harry knew from the distance in her eyes, that things were not right, not yet.

When it was over, Harry stood with Molly and Arthur in the garden at the Burrow to see Hermione and Ron off. Hermione was carrying a small tote bag which Harry had no doubt contained all their luggage and half a library. They were Apparating to London, where they would board a plane to Australia. Arthur was almost beside himself with gleeful delight at the prospect of Ron's adventure on the Muggle flying machine. Hermione promised to tell him everything about it when they got back.

After they had gone, Molly invited Harry to stay for lunch, which he reluctantly declined. He had only a short time before he needed to leave to attend Colin Creevey's funeral and all he wanted to do was find Ginny and talk. But Ginny, when he did find her, was busy in the kitchen, and wouldn't leave to go walk with him, though Molly insisted she was fine and didn't need Ginny's help. Frustrated and embarrassed, and not inclined to ask more than twice, Harry grabbed a sandwich from the plate on the table and left

on his own.

Later, Harry would always think of this day as the Day of Funerals. Fred's was only the first of many that day, and Harry quietly and dutifully relayed the messages he'd been given that first night in the Waiting Place. He found in every case, the family of the deceased seemed to embrace his words as if they were unquestionable truth. They could not hear enough about how their loved one looked, or what he or she said and did; drinking in Harry's words like barren, parched earth soaking up precious, life-giving drops of rain. He felt their grief lessen, and their acceptance of the death grow stronger as he described the peaceful place he'd seen, the joy he'd felt all around, and told them the last words he'd been sent to deliver.

Hardest of all was the memorial for Tonks and Remus Lupin. He held his infant godson and couldn't help smiling sadly at the bright pink hair on Teddy's tiny head, so like his mum's, but there were no words he could give Andromeda for the loss of almost her entire family. The most he could do was promise her that he would watch over this little child, her grandson, with her for as long as he lived.

At the end of the very long day, Harry was done in. More than anything, he would have loved to have had quiet understanding company, just to sit with and not be alone. He missed Ron and Hermione's easy camaraderie. Even more, he felt keenly the absence of the relationship he'd expected to be sharing with Ginny now. So he was not in the mood to go back to the Weasleys where it was noisy and where he might very well be rebuffed again. Instead, he went home to Grimmauld Place alone, ate the stew that Kreacher served him and went straight to bed, only wondering, just before he fell asleep, if there hadn't been bits of steak and kidney pie in that stew.

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This night, the Waiting Place was very different. As the white mist rolled away before him, Harry saw a bleak shoreline where restless whitecaps surged and crashed against dark rocks. A solitary figure in black knelt in obvious despair upon the shore, and Harry saw too, the small, fragile boat that tossed dangerously on the water nearby. If that was how this soul was meant to go on, Harry thought, it would be a perilous and terrifying journey.

A deep feeling of concern welled up in him at the thought and he hurried forward to find out if he could

help. It was not until he reached the side of the sobbing woman and she looked up at him, startled and afraid, that he recognised Narcissa Malfoy.

She gasped and clutched at Harry, and he took a step back with an involuntary reflex, but she had caught hold of the edge of his robe. "Help him, oh please, help him," she cried.

"Calm down, Mrs Malfoy," said Harry. "I want to help you..."

"No, NO! Not me," she insisted, frantic, tugging at him. "You're alive! You have to go back! You have to help him! Yaxley will kill him..."

"Who?" said Harry, raising his voice to make her hear him. "Kill who?"

"My son! Draco. At the Manor. Hurry! Oh, please hurry!"

And as she spoke those last words, she faded away into nothing like the mist. But her voice still echoed from the rocks. Hurry!

Harry had no idea what to do. He didn't know how to wilfully come to this place or leave. But he had to try. He closed his eyes and took a leap in his mind...

...and sat up in bed, badly shaken. Yaxley! But why was he attacking the Malfoys? It made no sense... And then in the next instant a cold shiver of horror trickled through Harry, and he knew. Yaxley had been there in the clearing in the Forbidden Forest. Yaxley had seen what Narcissa Malfoy had done, had seen her tell that most treacherous lie to the Dark Lord.

He sat frozen for a split second, his heart pounding, then was throwing off the blankets and reaching for his glasses on the bedside table. He yanked on his jeans over the boxers he'd worn to bed and stuffed his bare feet into his trainers. After a frenzied search on the floor, he came up with the dirty shirt he'd worn

yesterday and pulled it on.

Then he raised his wand and paused for a heartbeat... Oh, Merlin, if this wasn't real, he was going to look like the greatest idiot ever... and he didn't care. Closing his eyes, he pictured that moment when the cheer had gone up in the Great Hall, when Voldemort had fallen...

"Expecto Patronum!" The stag leapt from the end of his wand, huge and glowing white in the dark bedroom. "Find Kingsley," he told it urgently. "Yaxley's attacking Malfoy Manor, Narcissa Malfoy's hurt, maybe murdered. Send help immediately!" The stag took off, galloping straight through the window and away.

Harry didn't trust himself to Apparate to Malfoy Manor, and there was only one other way he could think of to get there fast enough. "Kreacher!" he yelled.

The panic in his voice must have carried, because a moment later the old elf popped into his bedroom with a sharp crack, brandishing a huge carving knife.

"Master Harry?!" he croaked, wild-eyed, the knife raised menacingly. He looked ready to kill.

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" said Harry quickly. "It's Narcissa... er... Miss Cissy. She saved my life in the last battle and now she's in danger. I need to get to Malfoy Manor as fast as possible. Can you take me to her?"

"Miss Cissy? In danger?" The old elf drew himself up, his wrinkled face fierce and outraged. He held out his hand to Harry. "Kreacher can do it, yes, Master Harry! You hold on..."

Harry came around the side of the bed, crouched down, and took Kreacher's outstretched hand. In his other hand, he held his wand poised and ready. "Bring the knife," he said. Kreacher grinned at him with his sharp grey teeth, and then with a crack they vanished.

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Kreacher Apparated Harry right into the midst of a raging wand fight. Harry dropped immediately into a defensive crouch behind a hedge, as jets of red and green light from flying curses streaked through the air overhead and lit up the vast dark lawn of Malfoy Manor.

From somewhere nearby, Harry could hear Draco's voice screaming, "Get out! Get out! Leave them alone! They didn't even have wands, you bastards! Leave them alone!"

Cautiously, Harry looked over the top of the hedge to get his bearings. He and Kreacher were in a side garden, crouched behind the yew hedge that bordered the long drive to the mansion. It didn't appear that anyone had seen them yet, they were all too focussed on each other, and the bang and crack of spells being cast had covered the sound of their Apparition. The front door of the Manor stood open wide and light streamed out across the drive. With a sharp intake of breath, Harry caught sight of the two bodies that lay only yards away on the lawn, at the edge of that stark spill of light. Lucius and Narcissa, Draco's parents.

Too many spells were being cast from the cover of bushes and trees out on the grounds for it to be only Yaxley attacking. Harry recalled that the Aurors were looking for three escaped Death Eaters, and was certain they were all here.

Another volley of spells shot past Harry towards the mansion, and he finally located Draco. Dressed only in pyjama trousers, Draco was kneeling behind one of the columns at the front of the house, alternately casting Shield Charms over his parents and Stunning Spells at the invaders. He was skilfully protecting all of them, but even at this distance, Harry could see the strain, the fury and the fear in his face.

In that moment, Harry was very grateful to whatever impulse had led him to return Draco's wand. If not for that, all three of them would have been completely at the mercy of the Death Eaters. Though in the few seconds that Harry watched, it was clear that Draco was having trouble with the wand, and that he was tiring. It was only a matter of time before he would be defeated.

The Death Eaters knew it too, for as Draco screamed at them again, begging them to leave, a derisive laugh echoed out over the lawn. Macnair, Harry thought, with a shudder.

Harry quickly cast a silent Shield Charm over the fallen Malfoys, then turned to Kreacher. "Do only what you have to, to incapacitate the Death Eaters," he whispered to the elf. "Don't kill anyone. And stay safe!"

The old elf gave him a feral grin and nodded. "Yes, Master Harry." He crept away, quickly disappearing into the darkness of the grounds.

Harry cast a second Shield Charm between Draco and the Death Eaters, timing it to match Draco's next spell and hoping the Death Eaters would not realise there was a second source. But Draco did. Harry saw him react in surprise, his eyes darting in Harry's direction, but in the next second a terrible howl went up from the bushes where the Death Eaters were hidden, followed almost immediately by a second scream of pain.

Harry burst from his place behind the hedge and dashed across the drive in the direction of the screaming voices, running low, wand at the ready. From the corner of his eye, he saw Draco was running too, coming down the stairs into the drive, headed for his mother. Harry turned his full attention, then, to the Death Eaters ahead, trusting Draco to take care of his parents.

Leaping over another hedge, Harry found two men down on the ground, unrecognisable in the dark, while a third was grappling with something smaller, something Harry recognised instantly as Kreacher. "Petrificus Totalus!" yelled Harry, and the man fighting with Kreacher went rigid and toppled over like an upended plank. "Stupefy!" he shouted, as one of the men on the ground tried to stand and run. The man collapsed and fell to the ground, unconscious. "Incarcerous!" Streamers of bluish-green rope shot from Harry's wand to wrap around the third man who was writhing on the ground, holding his shin.

"That bloody elf stabbed me leg!" yelled the man who was now trussed up on the ground. "I'm bleeding!"

"Oh, shut up!" said Harry. "Kreacher?" he called out. "Where are you? Are you okay?"

The elf appeared from the shadows, limping slightly, but otherwise unharmed. "We got them all, Master Harry!" he croaked with vicious delight, and Harry wondered for a fleeting second if the old elf hadn't enjoyed himself just a little too much.

"Guard them," said Harry, "but no more stabbing!" He walked back toward the house where Draco was kneeling next to his still unconscious mother. Draco had gathered her up in his arms, cradling her head against his shoulder. Lucius was sitting up now, but making no move to help Draco. As Harry got closer, he could tell that Lucius was dressed in an elegant dark dressing-gown over a white nightshirt, but he was sitting awkwardly and making odd humming noises to himself. A moment later, Harry recognised with dismay the eerie vacant, unfocussed look on Lucius's face.

Draco looked up as Harry reached him, his face a pale mask of shock. "Potter," he said in a hoarse whisper. "How...?"

"Never mind that," said Harry, dropping down to kneel next to Draco. "How is she?"

"Alive," said Draco, "but barely. She needs to get help. And there's no way I can take her anywhere..."

"What about your father. Is he...?"

"Obliviated," confirmed Draco with a grimace.

Just then the grounds were filled with a multitude of sharp cracks as Aurors Apparated in from all directions. "Harry!" roared Kingsley's deep voice, and Harry spotted him a second later striding up the drive.

"Here!" shouted Harry. Then he pointed out over the dark lawn. "The attackers are over there with my house-elf. But we need medical help here, now!"

Kingsley motioned several of the Aurors in the direction of the captured Death Eaters. "Take them straight to a holding cell; we'll sort them out later!" he called out. "Quincy! Blake! To me!"

Two men wearing lime-green armbands with medical emblems on them appeared an instant later at Shacklebolt's side. One of them ran ahead to crouch down by Draco and Narcissa. He began casting diagnostic charms and healing spells. "I can barely detect a pulse," he said. "Did you see what happened to her?" he asked Draco.

"They were using the Cruciatus Curse on her," said Draco. "She was screaming and screaming. It was horrible." His face was very pale and slick with sweat; it looked like he might be sick at any moment. "Will she be all right?" His voice was barely audible.

"I can't say yet," said the mediwizard. "I'm going to Apparate her directly to the Emergency Ward at St Mungo's." He stood up and faced Kingsley, who had reached them. "With your permission, sir..."

Kingsley nodded. "Go," he said. "I'll meet you there later."

The mediwizard conjured a stretcher and helped Draco move Narcissa gently onto it. He levitated it and a second later Disapparated with her.

"Sir," said the second mediwizard, who had been examining Lucius. "Mr Malfoy is unhurt, but he has been Obliviated. We should get him into care as well."

"Very well," said Kingsley. "Take him in."

Harry watched while the second mediwizard coaxed Lucius Malfoy to stand, and then Apparated him away. Draco was standing apart from them, his arms crossed over his chest. He seemed to be at a loss now that his parents were gone.

Turning back to the lawn, Harry tried to see what was happening with the three Death Eaters they had captured, but it was too dark to see clearly. "Kreacher?" he called quietly. A second later the house-elf appeared beside him, still clutching the large, now bloody, knife. "Did the Aurors take them all away?" asked Harry. "Did they recognise any of them?"

"They took them all, Master Harry. Kreacher heard the Aurors say two names, Rookwood and Macnair."

"Okay," said Harry. "Thank you, Kreacher, you were a great help tonight. You can go home now and I'll be along after I've talked to Minister Shacklebolt." He eyed the grisly knife again. "And let's, er, not be using that knife in the kitchen after this, okay?"

"Oh no, Master Harry," said Kreacher, looking affronted. "This is not a kitchen knife. This is Kreacher's victory sword from Hogwarts." He slashed it through the air twice, then jabbed an invisible foe. "Kreacher is keeping it for your protection now."

"Right," said Harry, slowly, not knowing if he should be proud or horrified, but too tired to think about it now. "I'll see you at home, in the morning..."

Kreacher bowed and vanished, and Harry turned back to find Kingsley talking to Draco. Draco seemed to be explaining what had happened and Kingsley was nodding and asking questions. Harry put his hands in his pockets and waited, not wanting to intrude. After a few minutes, Draco went into the house, and Kingsley came down the stairs and walked over to Harry.

"How did you know about this?" said Kingsley, without preamble. "Lucius's son told me he had no idea how you knew to come help him."

"I..." Harry paused, knowing it was going to sound crazy. But if anyone would believe him, it would be Kingsley. "I saw Mrs Malfoy in a dream, sir," he said, choosing to leave out the details of the Waiting Place. "She begged me for help. As soon as I woke up, I sent my Patronus to you and came here with Kreacher. I... er... know it sounds a bit mad, sir, but I was sure I was doing the right thing..."

"So it would seem," said Kingsley, frowning at him. "But there were Aurors standing right outside your front door, Harry," he said, his voice low and stern. "Why didn't you alert them?"

"Oh," said Harry. He ran one hand through his hair and shrugged, giving Kingsley a sheepish, apologetic half-grin. "I completely forgot about them."

"So you what? Popped over here and took out three Death Eaters! By yourself?"

"Well, not exactly," said Harry. "I had help."

"Oh, right! Your house-elf," said Kingsley, rolling his eyes.

"Yes," said Harry, thinking that one should never underestimate the effectiveness of a furious house-elf with a carving knife. He was afraid for a moment that Kingsley was going to be seriously angry with him, but then Kingsley laughed. His large hand came down on Harry's shoulder.

"Harry, I definitely need someone like you in the Auror Corps. I hope you're still considering that as a career."

"Yes, sir, I am!" said Harry, brightening.

"Good!" Kingsley gave Harry's shoulder an affectionate shake. "Come to my office when you're ready and we'll talk." He looked back toward the Manor. "Young Malfoy should be down in a moment and is going to need to get to St Mungo's. He tells me that he can't Apparate there himself, but I need to get back to headquarters to deal with our Death Eaters. Would you do me a favour, Harry, and take him there yourself?"

"Er..." said Harry. Bloody hell. "Yes, sir, I can do that." Merlin, Harry thought, even as he agreed. It was

going to be a long night.

Kingsley drew his wand. "I'm going to give you Auror clearance, Harry. It's a classified ward recognition spell that will allow you to Apparate directly into the reception room at St Mungo's instead of having to go out on the street and in through the glass of the Muggle store front."

Harry grinned. "Okay." Maybe this wouldn't be so bad, after all.

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Harry sat on the steps of Malfoy Manor, staring out at the dark lawn, waiting for Draco to come out. Minister Shacklebolt had been gone less than ten minutes, but it was cold outside and Harry had come away from home with no jacket. He was just about to try the door to the mansion when Draco came rushing out, slamming the door behind him.

Draco had pulled woollen trousers on over his pyjama trousers and stuck his feet into shoes, but wore no socks. He had put on a shirt and was carrying a jumper in one hand. In the other hand, he had a small suitcase, which explained what had taken him so long. Harry thought he must have packed for his parents, because it was obvious he hadn't taken the time for himself; he looked a right mess. Somehow, that made Harry like him just a little bit better.

But then Draco looked up and saw Harry there waiting, and came to an abrupt halt. "Potter?" he said, taking a step back. "What...? Why are you still here?"

"I'm to take you to St Mungo's," said Harry. "Kingsley asked me to. He gave me clearance to Apparate straight in."

"So what are you now, some kind of junior Auror?"

"Apparently so," said Harry, feeling just a little bit smug.

Draco stared at him hard for a second, then sneered that very familiar sneer. "Oh, well good for you," he said, and the undertone of resentment in his voice wasn't lost on Harry.

"Are you angry with me, Malfoy?" asked Harry, a bit incredulous. "I would have thought you'd be glad I came."

"I hate that you came," said Draco, "because every time I think I'm quit of you, somehow here you are again, and now we'll owe you even more than we did..." He drew a shaky breath. "I can't even Apparate by myself because my wand still thinks it belongs to you..."

"Which is exactly what I told you before I gave it back!"

Draco glared. "Yeah, and you've always been right about everything, haven't you?"

Harry glared back... and felt ridiculous.... What he wanted more than anything was to be home and back in bed, maybe with a cup of hot cocoa, not standing here arguing with Malfoy in the middle of the night. "Let's just go," he said, still annoyed, but trying hard to rein it in. "You can shout at me about being right some other time. When your parents are not in hospital."

"Fine," said Draco, and Harry heard an odd quiver in his voice. Draco took a few steps closer to Harry, and the emotion Harry saw in his eyes was no longer anger, but panic. Then, without warning, Draco seemed to crumble, the terror and shock of the night's events finally catching up to him.

Reflex-quick, without thinking, Harry stepped forward and caught Draco before he went down. His arms went around Draco, pulling him hard against himself, supporting his weight. Draco leaned into him, his jumper and the case still clutched in his hands at his sides, and Harry felt him shivering. "All right, Malfoy?" he asked, honestly concerned.

"What if... what if she's dead," whispered Draco, his mouth by Harry's ear. "I don't want to go.... I don't want to find out she's... dead...."

Harry took a deep breath. That might have been the most honest thing Draco Malfoy had ever said to him and his hands slid up to hold Draco more gently. "I'm coming with you..." he said, all of his former irritation forgotten. And then knowing he was probably giving up any chance of hot cocoa and bed tonight, he added, "...and I'll stay if you like. So you won't be alone."

He felt Draco nod and gulp in a breath. Draco's arms came up around Harry, the suitcase bumping against the back of Harry's legs; his other hand, still clutching the jumper, pressed into the middle of Harry's back.

It was a second or two before Draco spoke. "Okay," he said, finally. "Go."

Concentrating hard on his two-year old memory of the hospital's reception area, Harry turned on the spot and Disapparated them both to St Mungo's.

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The waiting area for Spell Damage on the fourth floor was mostly deserted. Only one old wizard, head tipped back and mouth open, his pointed wizard's hat pulled down over his eyes, snored quietly in a chair in the corner. Harry sat with Draco on a tattered sofa on the other side of the room, half-asleep himself. They'd been waiting for the better part of an hour for some news from the Healer who was assigned to Narcissa Malfoy's case. At least they had found out that she was still alive, and though the wait was nerve-wracking, Draco was visibly calmer than he had been.

Lucius Malfoy, they had learned, was undergoing emergency treatment for the reversal of memory loss, and it was not yet decided if he would be have to be admitted to the Janus Thickey Ward for permanent spell damage. Harry had wondered if his ex-Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, Gilderoy Lockhart, was still there, and how well they'd get on, if Mr Malfoy did have to live there. A tiny trickle of

amusement had run through Harry's mind as he imagined them competing with each other for attention. Then he had remembered Neville's parents, and the chance that Mrs Malfoy might suffer the same fate, had sobered him instantly.

About fifteen minutes earlier, Harry, unable to sit still another minute, had ventured up the rickety stairs to the tearoom on the fifth floor to see what he could find. The place had been empty, but he'd been very pleased to discover a tray of tea things, with pots of coffee, tea and cocoa charmed to stay hot, as well as a plate of assorted biscuits. He had helped himself to several, and had poured two steaming cups of cocoa to bring back downstairs.

Draco had accepted the snack without interest, but had slowly eaten one biscuit and had drunk a few sips of his cocoa. Harry had long since wolfed down the other biscuits and drained his cup, and was considering going up for more when Draco spoke to him for the first time since they'd arrived.

"I shouldn't have been angry with you earlier," said Draco. His voice was hushed and rough with emotion. "Especially not after what you did tonight," he added, staring into his cup of cocoa. "It just struck me as so unfair, that my life is such a fucking mess, and yours is so... so bloody perfect." He gave a short sniff of a laugh, and slanted a glance at Harry. "It was always meant to be the other way round, you know." He looked down again and seemed to be struggling with what he wanted to say. "The truth is..." he said finally, his voice growing softer now, "...I don't know how you knew, but I... well, besides the time you pulled me out of the Fiendfyre, I don't think I've ever been so glad to see anyone in my life as I was to see you tonight." He turned his head to look at Harry then, and his eyes were troubled. "How did you know?"

Harry met Draco's eyes for a few seconds, and then it was his turn to look down and stare into his now empty cup. He was uncomfortable talking about this, but he knew Draco needed an explanation. Harry took a deep breath, and reluctantly told him the truth. "I've been having these dreams... or maybe they're not dreams..." he said, "but every night since I defeated Voldemort, I find myself dreaming of meeting someone who has died." He looked up and faced Draco. "Tonight, I saw your mother. She begged me to come help you. So after I sent a message to Kingsley, I did."

"A dream?" said Draco. His eyebrows had disappeared somewhere up under his long, dishevelled fringe. Then one corner of his mouth twitched up. "So you weren't just being a nosey, interfering git? My mother asked you to come?"

"Yes," said Harry, barely suppressing the urge to roll his eyes. "She did."

Then Draco was serious again. "But you said it was people who died. My mother isn't dead."

"Yeah, I know," said Harry. "But she was there, and then she faded away. I never saw anyone else disappear like that. They all go... on... somehow."

"On? Where?"

"Dunno," said Harry. "I only see them before. They talk to me, and then they go on. I... er... actually... have a message for you, from one of them." Harry wondered if this was really the best time to tell Malfoy this, but he might not see him again and he wanted to keep his promise to Mrs Bell.

Draco stared at him in obvious disbelief. "A message. For me. From a dead person? Potter, if this is a joke, it is not even remotely funny."

"It's not a joke, Malfoy, I promise." Harry stared obstinately back. "Do you want to hear it or not?"

Draco slumped back against the sofa and sighed. "Go on then," he said.

"The person I saw in my dream was named Agatha Bell," said Harry. "She was Katie Bell's grandmother. Katie Bell was the girl that..." Harry's voice trailed off as Draco looked back at him, horrified, and Harry saw he didn't need to explain who Katie was. "Agatha Bell asked me to tell you that she forgave you for what happened with the necklace. She said she knows now that you were in trouble and that it was a mistake." Harry paused. "That was it," he said.

"She forgave me..." said Draco, very quietly. "She said that?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

They lapsed into silence, and Harry finally voiced the question he'd been wanting to ask all night. "What happened tonight?" he said. "Before I got there?"

Draco ran one hand through his pale hair and strands of it stuck up, no doubt in a poor imitation of Harry's own messy hair. Harry thought the pair of them must look a sight.

"A peacock out in the garden was screaming," said Draco, after a long moment. "They make a hideous noise." He shivered. "Father thought there was probably a fox in the garden and went out to chase it off. It's obvious now that those men were torturing the peacock, to make one of us come outside." He paused to drink down the last of his cocoa, then set the empty cup aside. "Mother and I were waiting in the upstairs hall," he continued in a tense voice, "and Father had only been gone a few minutes when the peacock stopped shrieking. We thought everything was fine, so we went back to bed."

Draco paused again and took a shaky breath. "I don't know how long I was asleep, not long maybe, but when I woke up, I could hear the screaming again. It took me a minute to realise that it wasn't the bird that was screaming - it was my mother. When my father didn't come back in, she must have gone down alone... I grabbed my wand... but I couldn't Apparate... so I ran. I had to run down three flights of stairs."

He stopped talking again, and then turned to Harry with haunted eyes. "When I got down there... they had her on the ground.... There were three of them... and they were all using Crucio on her at once...." He dropped his head into his hands. "She was screaming and screaming and screaming. And Father was just lying there. I thought he was dead..."

"Merlin, Malfoy," breathed Harry, horrified.

Draco's hands were fisted into his hair. "I don't know what I did next," he said. "I was so furious, I wanted to kill them. I used every defensive spell I could think of, and they backed off into the lawn. In between, I tried to cast Rennervate on my parents and shield them at the same time. But the wand wasn't working right..." His voice trailed off into a groan.

"Your mother must have been very close to death," whispered Harry. "But that must be why she faded in my dream. Because you got there in time to save her life."

Draco lifted his head. "Do you really think so?" he murmured. "I felt so... useless."

"I'm sure of it," said Harry. And then Harry understood something fundamental about why Draco had been so angry with him. "It was you that saved her, not me," he said firmly.

Draco looked up at him then, and there was doubt in the light grey eyes. Harry remembered how, in his dream, Narcissa had insisted that Harry go to the Manor to save Draco, not herself. And Harry had to admit that, as evil as he'd always believed the Malfoys to be, he was now unexpectedly moved by how selflessly devoted they were to each other.

"It was definitely you," Harry repeated with conviction.

Draco met Harry's eyes, searching for more than Harry's words to convince him of that truth. Harry stared back steadily, wanting Malfoy to believe him. And something, a kind of unspoken understanding, passed between them in that moment of eye contact. It seemed to Harry that all the barriers from their past crumbled and disappeared. Draco nodded, accepting Harry's conviction, and there was such relief and gratitude in his eyes now, that his whole face was alight with it. It was a transformation that took Harry by surprise, and his heart did a funny little flip inside his chest. He smiled back at Draco and the something in his gut that was always tight and wary when he was around Draco unwound and relaxed. Somehow, he felt now, they had left the past behind, and the freedom to be different with each other opened up before them like some vast unexplored and foreign territory.

And then the moment was gone; Draco looked away, his face sober again, and Harry wondered if he'd imagined that connection he'd felt, and if Draco had felt it at all.

They sat in silence for the next few minutes. Harry was thinking again of going upstairs for more biscuits and cocoa when the door from the corridor opened and Kingsley Shacklebolt walked in. He looked weary and put out. His eyebrows rose for a second when he spotted Harry, but he continued across the room to them.

"Malfoy," said Kingsley. He glanced over at the old wizard sleeping in the corner and lowered his voice. "And Harry," he said, "it's probably good that you're here, too. We've identified the three men that were apprehended earlier at the Manor. All of them were known Death Eaters. None of them were Yaxley. Harry, I thought you specifically mentioned his name when you sent the Patronus."

"That's what Mrs Malfoy told me..." said Harry with a shrug. "I dunno how accurate these dreams are... but she was very specific. She said 'Yaxley will kill him' and she meant Malfoy here, not her husband."

"Yes, well, considering how accurate it was otherwise," said Kingsley, "I don't think we can ignore it. We are still interrogating those men, so we'll make it a priority to find out if Yaxley had any connection to what happened tonight." He turned to Draco. "And until we know otherwise, Yaxley is at large, and we have to assume your life is threatened. That means you don't go home without an Auror escort, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," murmured Draco.

"And that goes for you, too, Harry," said Kingsley, looking from Draco to Harry. "When you leave here, Apparate straight from this room to your front door. There are Aurors on guard there to meet you. And I'll assign someone to accompany you if you need to go out." He put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'll let you know as soon as we find out anything," he added. "In the mean time, both of you should get some sleep." He waited until they had both agreed, then walked out. They listened his footsteps fading away down the corridor for a moment.

Draco slumped back against the sofa cushion, closed his eyes and let out a long breath. He was silent for so long that Harry thought he might have actually taken Kingsley at his word and fallen asleep. But then the door to the ward opened. One of the Healers in a lime-green robe stepped into the room and Draco was on his feet in an instant.

"Mr Malfoy?" said the Healer, and Draco nodded. "I'm Healer Pye. I can take you in to see your mother now, if you like. Her physical condition has been stabilised for now, but she is still unconscious. We can't determine the state of her mind until she regains consciousness, so for now, all we can do is wait. It's usually best not to force these things."

"And my father?" asked Draco, picking up his suitcase and the jumper he had never put on.

"Your father is perfectly well physically," said the Healer. "But he doesn't remember who he is yet. We are using some newly-developed spell and potion combinations that help reverse the spell damage and restore the Obliviated memory pathways in the brain. There is no guarantee that he will remember everything, but we've had success with this method in the past."

The Healer was leading Draco toward the door as he spoke. Harry stood up, suddenly realising he was about to be left behind. "Er, Malfoy, wait," he called out. Draco stopped and turned. "I'm going home," said Harry. "You'll be okay, now, yeah?"

"Go home, Potter," said Draco. "I'll try to manage without you... somehow." And then he followed Healer Pye through the door and was gone.

Harry had seen, though, that despite the joking words and the fleeting ghost of a smile on Draco's pale face, the look in Draco's eyes was sad and hopeless again.

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Finally, at home and back in bed, Harry found himself reliving the events of the last couple of hours instead of sleeping. He wanted to believe that he'd done everything he could, that his involvement with the Malfoys was finished.

But what came back to Harry over and over was the moment on the steps of Malfoy Manor when he and Malfoy had held each other. And the times, later in the waiting room at St Mungo's when he had looked, really looked, into Malfoy's eyes and seen through all the walls they'd built between them, and found instead something new and compelling.

Those eyes haunted him. He told himself that he was absolutely not interested in what Malfoy had been through or what was going to happen to him now. No, he was not.

But he was. The stark desolation in Draco's eyes had pierced him and embedded itself deeply into some tender inner place like a sliver of glass buried under his skin. He could not forget it. And he could not sleep.

He tried to bring to mind his once-treasured fantasy of holding Ginny, of kissing her; tried to remember how once that vision had meant everything bright and hopeful for the future... but it wouldn't come to him now. Instead, the body he felt in his arms was tall and lean and trembling, the voice whispering in his ear was low and achingly vulnerable. I don't want to go... What if she's dead...

And Harry could not stop worrying if Mrs Malfoy was all right. Or if Malfoy was okay there alone.

And where the bloody hell was Yaxley? In his dream, Narcissa Malfoy had said that name and no other...

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Standing outside Nappies & Prams Ltd in Diagon Alley late the next morning, his arms laden with packages, Harry was seriously wishing he'd brought his Invisibility Cloak. Not even the stern, bull-faced Auror who had accompanied him on this awkward shopping trip deterred the gawkers and well-wishers from stopping him every few seconds to shake his hand or in some cases, hug and kiss him. It was disconcerting, really. He'd had very little sleep, and was not in the best mood, but he'd decided to put the Malfoys out of his mind by going shopping. He'd got a much needed haircut, and some new clothes and toiletries for himself, and had just now purchased several items for Teddy. He intended to visit Andromeda later that afternoon armed with gifts, to let her know he was serious about being involved in his godson's life. Harry was determined that Teddy would have all the things he himself had never had.

The niggling voice in the back of his mind reminded him that he should also visit the Weasleys. Molly and Arthur deserved his love and support, even if the thought of seeing Ginny again made him feel like he'd lost the war instead of winning it. A flower shop just across the way caught his eye. The sign in the

window promised same day delivery. Inspired, he crossed the street and went into the brightly decorated shop.

A cheery chime announced his entry. The shop girl looked up from behind the counter; her eyes went huge and she gasped in surprise. The glass jar she was holding dropped to the floor and smashed. She looked up at Harry horrified. "Oh, Mr Potter," she said, "I'm so sorry! But I'm just that surprised to see you of all people in our little shop."

It had been like that all morning.

"Don't move," said Harry, thinking of the glass around her feet. He managed to pull out his wand without dropping any of his parcels, and cast a quick Reparo. The young woman set the restored jar back on the counter as if it were a priceless Ming vase and beamed at Harry. Harry had a suspicion it was about to become someone's instant family heirloom. He ordered a bouquet of roses and carnations for Molly, and wrote out a short note to be delivered with the flowers: Thinking of you, will visit soon... Love, Harry.

For a moment, he wondered if he should address it to Ginny instead, but Ginny, he thought, would just have to let him know when she was ready to talk. He was not going to chance being rebuffed all over again.

The Auror, Jenkins he thought the man had said, was waiting for him outside the shop door when he finished the flower order. "I'm ready to go home," said Harry, juggling packages and hoping Kreacher would have something for lunch.

"Got a message from headquarters, Mr Potter," said Jenkins, and Harry noticed the small screech owl perched on his shoulder. "Minister Shacklebolt would like to see you as soon as possible."

"Do you think I have time to take these packages home and get a bite to eat?" asked Harry.

"Can't rightly say, sir," said Jenkins, "but I'd think that would be fine. He didn't say it was that urgent."

"Take me home, then, please," said Harry. He disentangled one hand to hold onto Jenkins's arm, and nearly dropped everything when they Apparated into the small, shabby square in front of number twelve Grimmauld Place. He made it into the house, past the Tongue-Tying Curse and Dumbledore's dust-jinx and Mrs Black's portrait and into the dining room, and then almost spilled several items again when he tried to set everything down on the table. He scooped up the small plush teddy bear that had dropped under the table and set it next to the toy broom, then clattered downstairs to the kitchen to find Kreacher.

Five minutes later, Harry was back outside his house carrying a bag of sandwiches. Auror Jenkins gratefully accepted half a ham sandwich when Harry offered to share, then Apparated them both to the Ministry.

Kingsley didn't waste any words when Harry was ushered into his office. "We've found out Yaxley was there at Malfoy Manor," he said, as he motioned Harry to sit in the large hard-backed chair in front of the cluttered desk. "In fact, it's very possible he was inside the Manor the entire time we were there. Jugson, Rookwood, and Macnair were the three you caught. They all have confessed, and say that Yaxley went inside the Manor while they cast Crucio on Narcissa Malfoy. They say he went to find the son, Draco. He must have Apparated away during the fight. Draco is fortunate that somehow Yaxley missed finding him."

"Then my dream was right," breathed Harry. "Mrs Malfoy said that Yaxley was going to kill him."

Kingsley looked grim. "From what they've told us, they did not intend to kill Narcissa. They knew that the worst thing they could possibly do to her was to kill her son and leave her alive. They planned for her to witness the murder and intended for Draco to die a very horrible, painful death. Yaxley Obliviated Lucius so he couldn't identify them or testify against them later."

"Bloody hell," whispered Harry, thinking with horror that Malfoy had been in the Manor alone for so long while he'd waited outside. If Yaxley had still been inside, hiding...

"I've sent a team of Aurors to search the Manor. But even if they don't find any evidence that Yaxley was there, I don't think it's safe to allow Draco to return there alone, even with Auror protection. The place is too big," said Kingsley. "And you may be in danger, too. The three we caught were angry and bent on

revenge, Harry. They saw Narcissa Malfoy lie to Voldemort. They saw that lie bring about his defeat by protecting you. Until Yaxley is caught, I'm keeping all of you under constant guard. I'll just have to find a secure place for young Malfoy to stay temporarily..."

"He can stay with me," Harry heard himself saying. Then he nearly clapped his hand over his mouth. What was he thinking?

Kingsley looked surprised for a moment, then thoughtful. "That's very generous of you, Harry. And actually that might be the perfect solution, since Grimmauld Place is already protected." Kingsley stood and extended his hand to Harry over the desk. "Thank you, Harry," he said with a smile. "You've just made my day a lot easier."

And with that, Harry knew it was too late to take back the offer. He stood and took Kingsley's hand, and forced himself to smile back. Obviously, his day was not going to be getting any easier...

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Harry found Draco asleep on the sofa in the fourth floor Spell Damage waiting room where they had been sitting the night before. He was dressed in the same clothes, but had put on the jumper and kicked off his shoes; he was lying on his side, bare feet pulled up onto the sofa, one arm bent under his head for a pillow. His face was still very pale, and his hair was dingy and untidy. His shirt where it stuck out from under his jumper was rumpled. The bottoms of his pyjama trousers were sticking out from below the hem of his proper trousers. It was a stupid thing to notice, but Harry felt that small warm flip again in his heart.

It really was hard to dislike someone when they were so shattered and vulnerable, Harry reasoned. The fact that he might no longer dislike Malfoy felt odd, but not unwelcome. He was thoroughly tired of being at war with anyone.

"Malfoy," he said in a soft voice. "Hey, Malfoy, wake up." Harry touched Draco's bare foot and found it was icy cold. When Draco still didn't stir, concern spiked through him and he stepped closer and gently

shook Draco's shoulder. "Malfoy, hey c'mon, are you okay?"

Draco came awake suddenly with flailing arms and a gasp. Harry had to grab Draco's wrist to keep from being struck in the face, and then Draco was sitting up, staring at Harry with wide, frightened eyes. A split second later, recognition registered, and the light grey eyes went hard with anger. He jerked his arm out of Harry's grasp.

"Merlin, Potter," snarled Draco. "Scare a person to death, why don't you!" He pulled his feet up and wrapped his arms around his knees. He dropped his head down onto his arms so that his face was hidden. "What do you want now?" he asked, talking into the space under his arms. "I thought you were gone." He raised his head just a little so that he could look at Harry out from under the fringe that hung in his eyes. "Why aren't you gone?"

"I... er.... Sorry," said Harry. He suddenly had no idea where to begin. Guess what, Malfoy, you're to come stay with me for a while. Harry cringed inside. "How's your mum?" he said instead.

Draco's head came up a little more so that he could see Harry better. "What do you care, Potter?" he asked, but there was less anger in his voice now. It almost sounded like he was honestly curious. "Seriously. Why are you here?"

Harry sat down on the end of the sofa opposite Draco and thought about that. His first impulse had been to retort that he didn't care, but he bit back that response. He did care. Somehow, over the last couple of days, he had begun to care what happened to the Malfoys. It was like a major gravitational shift in the universe, and he had to sit for a gobsmacked moment and get used to the idea. "Kingsley sent me," he said finally. "And I wanted to know how your mum was doing."

Draco's face disappeared again into his arms, and Harry heard him let out a long breath. Then he sat up. His expression was still guarded, but no longer angry. "She's still unconscious," he said. "So they don't know anything more than last night." He paused and frowned. "What does Shacklebolt want?"

"He's found out more about the attack," said Harry, relieved to be back on safer ground. "They haven't caught Yaxley yet, but he was there at the Manor. The others say he went inside to find you. That he was going to kill you." Harry paused because Draco was staring at him now, his face ashen, his eyes wide with

horror.

"He would have gone up the main stairs," whispered Draco, "but I came down the back way, by the private stairs. They're faster."

"So that's why he didn't find you," said Harry. "Kingsley wondered about that. They're going to send a team out the search the Manor," he went on, in a low voice, "but Kingsley says you can't go back home, not even with a guard. They wanted revenge for what your mother did to help me, so until they catch Yaxley, it's too dangerous."

And Harry suddenly heard what he'd said and guilt rose up like a hot tide in his throat. "I'm sorry, Malfoy," he whispered. "If your mum hadn't helped me...."

Draco turned away and looked out across the room. Then he shook his head and turned back to meet Harry's eyes again. "Don't be stupid, Potter," he said bitterly. "She told me herself that she did it to get back to the castle to find me. You could as well say it's all my fault." He gave a soft derisive sniff. "Or better yet, my father's for involving us with that madman in the first place. The truth is maybe if she hadn't helped you, we wouldn't be here alive at all. Either of us."

They stared at each other for a minute, silent. Then Harry nodded. "Right," he said. "You're right."

Draco's mouth twitched up at the corners. "Merlin's balls, that might be a first," he said. "You thinking I'm right about anything."

"Yeah," said Harry. "It might be at that."

Draco nodded, and then looked around the room with distaste. "So," he said. "Guess I'll be calling this place home for a while."

"Er," said Harry. "About that. That was the other reason I came... I sort of told Kingsley that you could

stay with me..."

Draco's eyebrows had disappeared up under his untidy fringe again. "Potter, you're starting to scare me," he said, and the eyebrows came down in a frown. "You said we were even. You gave me the wand back and said we didn't owe each other anything. Why the sudden interest? What do you want from me?"

Harry held up his hand. "Hold on!" he said. "I don't want anything, Malfoy. This isn't about owing. Your mother asked me to help you and -"

"And what? Suddenly now you're making me your latest little do-gooder project? No thanks, Potter." Draco stuck his foot out and poked Harry in the leg with his toe. "So get your arse off my bed."

"Oh, fine!" said Harry, jumping up. "You'd rather stay here than have a proper bed and bathroom? When was the last time you had a shower, Malfoy? Or a hot meal?"

Draco just glared up at him, his arms crossed over his chest. "I'm not staying with a bunch of Muggles, Potter. I don't care how many showers they have."

Harry glared back. "What?" he said, totally exasperated. This not disliking Malfoy thing he'd thought was happening, was disappearing fast. "Who said anything about staying with Muggles?"

"You did," said Draco, firmly, then the certainty in his expression wavered. "Don't you live with Muggles?"

Harry tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling as if something up there could give him strength or patience, or both. "No," he said. "No! I do not live with Muggles. I have a house to myself. A proper Wizarding house with four floors and lots of rooms." He let out a sigh and looked back down at Draco. "It's not fancy like you're used to, but..." He trailed off because Draco's confused expression had turned into a suspicious frown.

"I've just remembered," said Draco. "Aunt Bella was raving about some house you inherited. Some house she thought should have been hers. I never paid much attention when she was raving like that."

"Look," said Harry, still exasperated. "I don't care what Bellatrix thought. It's my house. And if you don't want to stay with me, then you can bloody well stay here."

Draco looked around the room again and wrinkled his nose. "I didn't say I didn't want to stay with you," he protested. "Anything is better than this. Except Muggles," he added under his breath. Then he narrowed his eyes. "And as long as this isn't some harebrained philanthropic scheme Granger's cooked up... Rehabilitation of Underage Death Eaters or some such -"

"She's in Australia," said Harry, flatly. "And it's far more likely she'll want to kill me when she finds out I've taken you in, than make you into a charity project."

"Well," said Draco, that familiar smirk showing up for a fleeting moment. He stuck his feet into his shoes and stood up. "As long as it's you she's after, that's okay, then."

Harry snorted. "The Auror downstairs will stay on guard for your parents' protection," he said. "Do you need to see your mum before we go, or check in with the hospital staff to tell them where you are in case of an emergency?"

Draco held up his left arm. There was a thin green band around his wrist. "MediAlert bracelet," he said. "It's charmed to flash and beep if there's an emergency." He let his arm drop, then he looked toward the door to the ward. "And mother doesn't know I'm here, even when they do let me sit with her. I was in there about an hour ago." He looked back at Harry, and his face was solemn and worried. "You'll bring me back, if the bracelet goes off?"

"Course, I will," said Harry. Their eyes met and Harry felt his heart do that funny little flip again in his chest. "C'mon," he said, holding out his arm. "You'll have time to get cleaned up before dinner."

Draco paused for a moment, then stepped closer and took hold of Harry's wrist. "I'm ready," he said.

"Go."

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Harry Apparated onto the top step at number twelve Grimmauld Place. Both of the Aurors on guard had their wands drawn in an instant. They nodded at Harry, and kept their wands drawn, on alert until he and Draco could get inside.

Harry turned to Draco and drew his wand. "There are a couple of traps inside the door," he explained. "Nothing will hurt you, just bear with it for a moment, and we'll be through." Then he tapped the door twice with his wand and took Draco in.

"Bloody hell," said Draco, coughing and owl-eyed by the time they'd reached the door to the dining room. "You have to go through all that every time you come in?"

"I'm used to it," said Harry, grateful that Mrs Black's portrait had remained behind its drapes this time. "But I need to find someone to break those spells. Mad-Eye Moody set them up to keep Snape out, so they're completely useless now."

"I don't even know what happened to Professor Snape," said Draco frowning, "except that the Dark Lord boasted that he'd killed him to be master of the Elder Wand."

"Voldemort had Nagini kill him," said Harry bluntly. "Bit clear through his neck. I saw it happen."

Draco inhaled in a sharp breath and clutched the collar of his jumper. His face paled. "That might have been me," he said, "if the Dark Lord had known the truth."

"Yes," said Harry. "Lucky for you he was blinded by his own arrogance. Thought he knew everything, but

he didn't. Not by a long shot."

Draco nodded, but he looked shaken. Neither of them said what they were both thinking, that Draco would have been the next to die, if Harry had not won the duel. "I loathed that snake," Draco said in a low voice.

"Me, too," said Harry, remembering that terrifying encounter at Godric's Hollow. "I barely got away from it once myself," he said, as he walked into the dining room and began to gather up the items he'd bought for himself earlier that morning. "It bit my arm. I still have a scar." It was too late now to visit Teddy, so he left those packages on the table.

Draco was looking at him from the doorway, his grey eyes wide with both horror and surprise, and something Harry had never seen in them before. It looked suspiciously like respect, or even admiration. Harry smiled a little to himself, feeling gratified. Maybe having Malfoy here would not be all that bad.

"Who is this for," asked Draco, coming to stand beside Harry and picking up the toy broom. "I hate to tell you, Potter, but you're too old for the Tiny Tots Quidditch League. Your abilities would suit, but you've missed your chance by a good twelve years."

"That's for Teddy, you git," said Harry. "My godson." And then Harry had a moment of realisation. "And your cousin," he added.

For a moment, Draco looked confused, then he frowned. "You mean that werewolf baby?"

"He's not a werewolf," said Harry, turning on Draco. "He's a Metamorphmagus. And his grandmother is your mother's sister. I doubt she's been told what's happened to your mum, and I think she should know. She's lost all her other family." Harry paused, then added firmly, "I was going to visit them tomorrow. I think you should come with me."

Draco set the toy broom back on the table. "I'll think about it," he said.

Harry finished gathering up all the packages he wanted to take upstairs. "C'mon," he said. "I want to show you something."

They went back to the stairs in the entrance hall. "That's just revolting, Potter," said Draco with disgust when he saw the house-elf heads mounted on the wall.

"Not my idea, believe me," said Harry, starting up the stairs. He got half-way up before he realised that Draco was still standing at the bottom, seemingly frozen in place, an expression of dawning comprehension on his face. "What?" said Harry.

"I've been here before," he said slowly. "I remember this now. This house, those grisly heads. I know why Aunt Bella thought she should have this house." He turned around and looked directly at the curtained portrait. "There's a portrait under those drapes, isn't there?"

"Yes," said Harry, "but no, Malfoy, don't -" It was too late. Draco was standing in front of the portrait and had thrown open the heavy curtains.

"Mudbloods! Half-breeds! Scum! Dishonour and shame on the house of Black!"

Draco's feet hadn't moved, but he was leaning away, as if blown back from the painting by the force of Mrs Black's screaming. Much amused, Harry sat down on the stairs to watch.

"Begone you foul traitors! How dare you defile this house of my fathers!"

Draco turned his head to glance up at Harry. "Likes you a lot, doesn't she?" he grinned. "Bet this has been fun to listen to every day."

"Oh, yeah," said Harry. "Loads of fun."

Draco turned back to the painting, his head tilted to one side. "Gah," he said. "I didn't know portraits could change so much. She used to be such a sweet old lady."

Harry boggled at him over the packages he was holding in his lap. "You have got to be joking," he said. "She's been like that ever since Sirius -"

"You dare mention that name in this house!" screeched the portrait. "Blood-traitor, abomination, filth and shame of my flesh -"

Draco clapped his hands in front of the portrait's face to get her attention. "Auntie Burga!" he yelled. "Look! It's me! It's Draco! Narcissa's son! Your great-nephew!"

The portrait drew in a startled breath. Harry could see her squinting, uncertain. "Draco? Cissy's darling ickle Drackykins? Is it really you, dear?" And then a monstrous smile broke out on the portrait's face. "Oh, it is! It is you! And look how you've grown!"

Harry put his face down into the parcels on his lap and was shaking with silent laughter. Ickle Drackykins. The portrait was practically cooing. He was never going to get over it.

Then Mrs Black's face crumpled. "Oh, my dear, I'm so relieved to have a proper Black son home at last. You cannot imagine what horrible things have been going on in this house. I've been quite helpless to stop it..." She was crying now, tears streaming down her painted face.

"Now, now," Draco was saying. "I'm going to be staying here for a while. I'll take care of everything, you'll see." As he talked, he gently pulled the drapes closed over his great-aunt's portrait. "Just you rest now, and leave everything to me," he said, and backed away, then bolted up the stairs to where Harry sat. "Not one word, Potter," he said, "or I'll tell her dreadful lies about you and she'll never shut up."

Harry just shook his head and wisely held his tongue. He couldn't talk anyway for laughing so hard.

"And just so you know," said Draco, as they continued up the stairs, "I was only five the last time I was here."

Harry finally stopped laughing enough to speak. "I have never heard her talk like that to anyone."

"My mother's parents died before I was born," said Draco. "So I always thought of her as my grandmother on the Black side of the family. And I was as close as she was ever going to come to having a grandchild," he went on. "By the time I was born, my mother's cousins were either dead or in Azkaban, so she was not going to have any grandkids of her own." He stopped as they reached the first floor landing and looked back down the stairs. "Burga Black was a fierce believer in the old pureblood traditions. She never would have acknowledged my Aunt Andromeda's daughter. I was all she had."

"Then, if Sirius hadn't left this house to me..." said Harry thoughtfully. "I've just realised, it might have been yours now."

Draco gave him a withering look. "First my wand, Potter, now my house..."

"Oh, right," said Harry. "Like you need another house. You could fit four or five of this house in yours." He walked into the drawing room and dumped his packages onto the sofa. "The toilet and bathroom are just down the hall," he told Draco, "but first, I thought you might want to see this."

"See what," said Draco, who had followed Harry into the drawing room, and was looking around at the worn furniture and wall coverings with his nose wrinkled. "That the house hasn't been kept up properly?" He turned and his gaze followed where Harry was pointing, and then Harry heard his soft, surprised intake of breath. "I remember this," he murmured, crossing the room to stand in front of the old tapestry of the Black family tree. "I couldn't read it then," he said. "But Mother showed me my name." His fingers traced the lineage lines down and out until he found his way to Narcissa Black, then he sat on the floor in front of his own name written there in gold thread. "It all ends here," he said in a hushed voice as his fingers brushed over his name. "I'm the last."

"There's Teddy," said Harry. "He may not be on there, but he should be." Harry saw Draco's fingers slide

up to touch the black burned mark that was next to his mother's name.

"I've never met my Aunt Andromeda," he said.

"She needs her family, Malfoy," said Harry. "You and your mum. Teddy needs you, too. Times have changed. Maybe your mum would like to have her sister back..."

"Maybe..." said Draco. "I said I'd think about it."

"Fair enough," said Harry. He came to stand in front of the tapestry. He'd never paid much attention to it after the one time Sirius had shown it to him. However, during the time he, Ron and Hermione had spent hiding out in the house last summer, Hermione had studied it and made a startling discovery. Sirius's great-aunt Dorea Black had been married to a man named Charlus Potter and they had had one son, a son left unnamed on the tapestry. Could that unnamed son possibly be James, Harry's father? Harry had longed to find out, but at the time, there had been no one to ask.

"Do you know anything about who Charlus Potter was, Malfoy," asked Harry, running his finger over the small, worn gold letters. "His name is right here. I've sometimes wondered if he was my grandfather."

Draco stood up, looked at the name Harry was pointing to and frowned. "No idea," he said. "Frankly, I'm shocked to find the name Potter on here at all," he said.

"Yeah, I was too," said Harry, wondering if he'd ever find out if he was related to Charlus Potter. "If you want to get cleaned up before dinner, the bathroom on this floor is at the end of the hall on the right. I should warn you, though, if you don't like snakes - they're all over the fixtures in there." He grinned at Draco's grimace. "Funny, I thought Slytherins all liked snakes," he said.

Draco glared at him. "Yeah, and we've already established that you know everything, Potter."

Harry chuckled and went back to the sofa to rummage around in his packages for a moment, then he

held out a bag labelled with the monogram of a men's fine toiletries shop in Diagon Alley. "There's soap and shampoo in here, brand new. I'll be down in the kitchen in the basement. Just come down when you're done."

Draco hesitated a moment, then took the offered bag. "In case you've forgotten," he said, "I have no clothes but what I'm wearing right now. I need to go home and get some things."

"I'll talk to Kingsley," said Harry. "See if we can arrange for you to go back there. In the mean time, I know some good cleaning spells..."

Draco looked around the dilapidated room and gave Harry a sceptical look. "Could have fooled me," he said.

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"I have an unexpected guest," Harry told Kreacher. The old elf was in the kitchen, busily preparing dinner. "He'll be staying for a few days. Do we have enough for two tonight?"

"Of course, Master Harry!" croaked the elf. He looked positively pleased. "Would Master Harry like Kreacher to serve dinner upstairs?"

"No, that's fine, Kreacher. No need to be fancy. Malfoy can eat in the kitchen."

Kreacher turned from the stove and stared at Harry, a strange, anxious look in his eyes. He no longer looked so pleased. "Did Master Harry say Malfoy?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Draco Malfoy. Miss Cissy's son. While his parents are in St Mungo's, and until the Aurors catch Yaxley, he'll be staying here." Harry had expected a more enthusiastic reaction similar to

that of Mrs Black's, so he was puzzled when Kreacher turned away scowling and muttering something under his breath.

"Is something wrong, Kreacher?" asked Harry. "I thought you'd be happy to have Miss Cissy's son here."

"There is nothing wrong, Master Harry," said Kreacher, ferociously chopping something at the sink. "But Kreacher remembers Mr Draco very well. He was a favourite of my Mistress. Dinner will be ready in half an hour."

Harry sensed there was a story there, but he had another more pressing problem. He needed to get a message to Kingsley. It was clear that he was going to need a new owl, and for a moment, a sharp spike of grief for Hedwig rose up inside him. "Kreacher, I'm sorry to interrupt again, but when you are finished with dinner, would you take a message to Minister Shacklebolt? I need to find out if I can take Malfoy to the Manor for a few minutes to pack some clothes to bring back here."

Kreacher stopped chopping. "Kreacher can go fetch Mr Draco's clothes and save Master Harry the trouble," he said. He put the vegetables he'd been chopping into the stew pot and turned to Harry. "Kreacher can go now while the stew is cooking and be back straight away."

"Oh, thank you, Kreacher," said Harry, giving the old elf a wide smile. "That would be a huge help." He stepped closer and crouched down to the elf's level. "The Aurors think Yaxley was in the Manor, so please be careful. Stay safe and come home immediately if there's any danger, okay?"

"Yes, Master Harry," said Kreacher, looking very pleased again. He disappeared into the boiler cupboard for a moment, and came out carrying the big carving knife, his victory sword. "Kreacher will take this to be safe," he said.

Harry laughed. "All right," he said.

"And with Master Harry's permission, Kreacher will speak to Mr Draco and ask him what he would like brought back from the Manor..."

"Yes," said Harry. "Good idea. He's having a bath, I think, in the first floor bathroom."

Kreacher gave Harry a low bow and scurried up the stairs, victory sword in hand.

Harry paused a moment, then went to look in the pot that was simmering on the stove. It looked like a thick vegetable and beef stew and smelled delicious. He spotted a treacle tart in the oven too, and grinned, immensely grateful for Kreacher's culinary skills, as well as his now devoted service. Harry knew full well he could not do without the old elf now. Funny how drastically things had changed, he thought, as he made his way back upstairs to the drawing room. All it had taken was a little kindness and understanding, and he had to acknowledge that he had Hermione to thank for that.

Harry had just gathered up all his discarded packages from the drawing room, when a loud shriek echoed from down the hall.

"Eeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!"

Dropping everything back onto the sofa, Harry sprinted for the bathroom at the end of the hall. "Malfoy?" he called. He rapped twice on the door, then not waiting for an answer, stuck his head into the steamy room.

"Out! Get out!" Draco was shouting at something in the room. He was standing in the tub of soapy water, stark naked, a towel clutched to his chest with one hand. A long-handled bath brush was gripped in his other hand like a fencing sword. Shampoo bubbles in his hair ran in little rivulets down his pink, furious face.

It was a couple of seconds before Harry could tear his eyes away from that spectacle to see what Draco was shouting at. Then he nearly laughed out loud. Kreacher was in the room brandishing his victory sword very near Malfoy's manly bits, which were just barely covered by the drape of the towel Draco was holding in front of him.

"Kreacher!" Harry had to shout to be heard. Kreacher turned and grinned at Harry, showing his sharp grey teeth, a wicked, gleeful expression on his face.

"Kreacher is showing Mr Draco how Kreacher stabbed the Death Eaters at the Manor," croaked the elf. He was still swishing the long carving knife perilously close to Draco's bits.

"GET HIM OUT OF HERE," screamed Draco, trying and failing to fend off the sword with the bath brush.

"Right. Kreacher, please wait for me in the drawing room," said Harry, barely containing his amusement.

Kreacher stopped waving his sword and with a low bow to Harry, slipped out of the room. Draco sank down into the tub of water up to his chin, towel and all. His knees stuck out of the water in front of his face and he glared daggers at Harry.

"Er... All right there, Malfoy?"

"No! I'm not all right!" he seethed. "I'm traumatised! As if I wasn't traumatised enough already!" One hand came up out of the water to push the soapy rat-tails of hair out of his face. "I want to go home! I'd rather face Yaxley again than live here with that bloody knife-crazed house-elf."

"I'll talk to him," said Harry, still vastly amused. "It won't happen again." Draco just gave him another nasty glare and sank further into the bathwater as Harry closed the door.

Harry managed to hold in his mirth until he got to the drawing room, then he collapsed into one of the stuffed armchairs and howled with laughter. It didn't help that Kreacher was dancing around the room looking immensely pleased with himself, his sword raised in a victory salute over his head. It was obvious now that Kreacher's love for Miss Cissy did not, in Kreacher's mind, extend to her beloved son.

Kindness and understanding, Harry reminded himself, before he spoke. "You know you frightened him

half to death in there," he said, when he could stop laughing.

"Yes, Master Harry."

"And you did it on purpose?"

"Yes, Master Harry." The sword came down, and a glimmer of regret showed on Kreacher's face. "Is Master Harry angry with Kreacher?"

"No!" said Harry, as the old elf appeared suddenly poised to grab a nearby lamp to punish himself. "No, but it's not okay for you to threaten guests in my house. You won't do that again, will you." It wasn't a question.

"No, Master Harry," croaked Kreacher. "But Kreacher did enjoy himself this one time."

Harry was intrigued. "Tell me why," he said. "Why would you want to do that?"

Kreacher crept close to Harry's chair, his whole demeanour abruptly changed. His lower lip trembled and Harry remembered how Kreacher had sobbed while telling Regulus's story and hoped he was not in for a second dose of tears. But Kreacher seemed to control himself after a moment.

"When Mistress was ill and dying," said the elf, his deep croaking voice quivering, "she had no one but Kreacher, so Miss Cissy came to stay and help, and she brought Mr Draco with her. Mr Draco was a small boy then, and Mistress adored him. She ordered Kreacher to obey Mr Draco like herself and to be very nice to him." Kreacher's face was angry now. "But Mr Draco was not a nice boy. All the time while Kreacher knew Mistress was dying and Kreacher was grieving and worried and did not know what would happen to him when Mistress died, Mr Draco ordered Kreacher to do hurtful things and played mean tricks on Kreacher. So Kreacher has never liked Mr Draco."

"Ah," said Harry. Kreacher was staring at him, a pathetic expression on his face, as if he didn't know if

Harry would punish him or not. "You don't still have to obey, Mr Dra - er, Malfoy, do you?" Harry asked.

"No, Master Harry. Kreacher was released from that order when Mistress died."

"That's good," said Harry. "In future, you do not have to obey him at all, but I don't want you to threaten him while he's here. So that means no more waving that victory sword at him, okay?"

Kreacher looked regretfully at his precious sword but nodded. "Yes, Master Harry. Mr Draco will not see Kreacher's sword waving again."

"Thank you, Kreacher," said Harry. "Malfoy was always mean to me too when he was younger, but with Miss Cissy and his father in hospital, he's very afraid and worried right now, like you were when your mistress was dying. So we have to try to be more understanding than he was. Can you do that?"

Kreacher stood straighter, then bowed low to Harry. "Yes, Master Harry. Kreacher can try."

"Good," said Harry, smiling at the old elf. "And if he is ever mean to you now, you tell me straight away. I'll deal with him myself."

The old elf looked almost teary-eyed again. "Master Harry is very kind to Kreacher."

"Er," said Harry, suddenly feeling awkward and not knowing what to say. Kreacher looked like he might actually want to hug Harry and it was a little scary. "Did Malfoy tell you what clothes he wanted from the Manor?" he asked to change the subject.

"Yes, Master Harry," said Kreacher, composing himself. "Mr Draco is wanting all the clothes from the wardrobe in his room on the third floor."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Can you manage that?" he asked.

"Kreacher can make several trips."

"No, I don't want you to do that," said Harry, and then a sudden inspiration hit him. "Please go check on dinner. I might have a better idea."

While Kreacher went down to the kitchen to take the treacle tart from the oven, Harry went upstairs to the room on the second floor that Hermione was using. After looking around a moment, he spied the beaded bag that had accompanied them through all their adventures in the past year. He took it down from a shelf over the chest of drawers and shook it. Nothing rattled or clanked inside it. He opened it and peered inside, then reached his arm down into it up to his shoulder. It did indeed seem to be empty. With a grin, he started back downstairs to give it to Kreacher.

On the way down, he checked on Malfoy in the bathroom.

Draco was sitting on the edge of the now empty tub, his arms crossed over his chest. He had one towel wrapped around his waist, another draped like a cape over his shoulders, and a third wrapped turban-like around his wet hair. "Thought you'd forgotten me," he said, obviously sulking.

"Oh, I haven't forgotten you," said Harry. "But I've had a long talk with Kreacher. Seems you were deserving of that little prank he pulled."

Draco's face went pink again. "I might have been," he said. "But I was only five. And I was bored and Auntie Burga was dying, and Mother was too busy to play with me." His face went even pinker. He held up one hand to forestall Harry's response. "Don't say it," he said. "I heard how childish that sounded."

"Kreacher was grieving and scared when his Mistress was dying and you tormented him. I don't blame him at all for what he did," said Harry. "But I've asked him not to threaten you again. And you might try being kind to him now. It might change how he thinks of you."

Draco sighed and looked down at the black marble floor. "Fine," he said. "But you might have warned me that you had a house-elf," he added. "He scared the life out of me when he popped in here asking about my clothes. Then he pulled that bloody knife out from behind his back..."

"And that was when you screamed like a girl?" asked Harry, stifling a laugh.

"Shut up," said Draco, glaring again. "Anyone would have screamed with that knife flying at them." Then he stretched out one foot and poked the pile of dirty clothes he'd taken off. "So, is he going to get my clothes, or am I to go around in wet towels for the rest of the night?"

"Wet towels is what you deserve," said Harry. "But I'm sending him now to get everything from your room that he can fit into this." He held out the little beaded bag for Draco to see. Then he closed the door and laughed to himself all the way down to the kitchen at the sudden look of horror that had appeared on Draco's face.

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After Kreacher left with the bag, Harry retrieved a faded dressing-gown he'd found at the back of the wardrobe in his own bedroom, that he guessed had once belonged to Sirius, and handed it in to Draco, waiting in the hall while Draco put it on. Then he took Draco up to the third floor and showed him the vacant bedroom opposite his own, the one that had a mouldy cabinet that he'd spent an afternoon scrubbing out with Ron and Hermione the summer before Fifth Year.

"You can have this room while you're here," he said.

Draco had simply looked around the spacious room, at the carved four-poster bed with its ornate dark green bed curtains, and the high velvet-curtained window and nodded. "This was the room Mother and I stayed in," he said. "Mother liked this room." He sounded almost wistful.

"My room's across the hall," said Harry.

Crack! Kreacher appeared in the hall, bent over, his hands holding onto the top of the little beaded bag that was sitting on the floor at his feet.

"Did you get everything?" asked Harry. "Any trouble?"

"Kreacher got everything, Master Harry," said Kreacher, dragging the bag down the hall to where Harry stood. "No trouble."

Harry hefted the extremely heavy bag, carried it into Draco's room and set it on the bed. The bed visibly sagged under it. "There's your stuff," said Harry to Draco. "I'm going downstairs to eat. Come down yourself when you're dressed." He left Draco staring owl-eyed at the little beaded bag making a big dent in the middle of his bed.

Harry was well into his bowl of stew when Draco came down. He was neatly dressed and his hair was combed. He looked a thousand times better than he had earlier that afternoon at the hospital.

"Oh, very funny. You and your little bag joke," was all he said to Harry, his voice dripping with sarcasm. However, when Kreacher set a bowl of stew in front of him, he bowed his head and politely said, "Thank you, Kreacher."

Kreacher muttered something that sounded suspiciously like " - poor excuse for a pure-blood..."

Harry smiled into his bowl. Evidently, Malfoy was not going to get off so easily. But having Malfoy here was entertaining at the very least. He hadn't laughed so much in months.

Draco ate like he'd been starving, and Harry guessed that wasn't far wrong. After generous portions of

the sweet treacle tart with cream poured over the top, Harry took Draco back to St Mungo's to check on his parents. Narcissa still had not regained consciousness, a fact that obviously worried Draco very much. Harry didn't ask about Lucius. Draco didn't mention his father's condition either, but spent several minutes speaking with Healer Pye in a low, concerned voice, then followed the Healer out into the ward.

Harry waited, sitting on the tattered couch that had become quite familiar now. Draco came back a few minutes later carrying a thick book. Theories of Treatment for the Acutely Confunded and Severely Obliviated, Harry read on the cover.

"Healer Pye let me borrow it," said Draco. "I wanted to know more about what they're doing for Father." He looked around the little room, his face downcast. "There's nothing more I can do here," he said. He touched the little green bracelet he still wore. "They said they'll let me know if there's any change at all."

"Home, then?" said Harry, and saw Draco wince, then nod. Harry stood and Draco took hold of his arm without a word, and Harry Apparated them back to Grimmauld Place.

Errol came careening out of the night sky as soon as Harry appeared on the top step outside his door. Harry held out his arm, but the old owl missed, landed with a crash against the front door, slid down, and fell over with his legs sticking up. Harry heard one of the Aurors on guard laughing as Harry detached the message that was tied to Errol's leg. It was a note from Molly thanking him for the flowers and wishing he had come to dinner. All of us miss you, she had added, and the word 'all' had been underlined. Harry knew immediately what she was alluding to and realised that he had not thought of Ginny once since he'd had the flowers sent that morning.

Draco paused inside the doorway to the dining room when they got inside, a frowning but thoughtful expression on his face as he surveyed the gifts Harry had bought for Teddy. "I've decided to go with you," he said after a moment. "I want to meet my aunt."

"I'm sure she'll be glad to see you," said Harry, inwardly pleased. "I was going to go right after lunch tomorrow." He went ahead up the stairs and Draco followed him up. Harry went into the drawing room for a moment to collect the packages he'd dropped there earlier, then continued up to the third floor. He headed straight to his bedroom, but Draco stopped in the hallway and nodded at the stairs going up to the fourth floor.

"What's up there," he asked. "I was never allowed to go up."

"Regulus's and Sirius's bedrooms are up there," said Harry, stopping outside his bedroom door. "They're a bit of a mess. Snape searched the house while it was empty, and I've not been up there since last summer. But go up if you like. I don't care."

Draco set the Healer's book on the small desk just inside his room, then went up the stairs.

Harry watched him for a moment until he disappeared at the top of the stairs, then went into his own room to set the all the packages with his new clothes on his bed. He debated unwrapping them for a moment, then decided to wait and go up to the fourth floor too. He found Draco standing in the middle of Regulus's room.

"Thought you'd like that room," said Harry.

Draco gave him a brief, quizzical look over his shoulder. "I don't," he said. "Reminds me too much of school, and..." He frowned at the newspaper clippings over the bed. "And the Dark Lord."

"Hmm," said Harry. "I figured you'd have a room just like this. With all the Slytherin colours and Death Eater stuff."

"For your information," said Draco imperiously, "my room at the Manor is decorated in tasteful shades of blue and there are no snakes." He turned to Harry. "And what's yours? All Gryffindor red and gold, with lions everywhere?"

"Er, no," said Harry, surprised. "It's blue as well. The master bedroom here was done in silver and green too, so I had Kreacher change it when I came back. But I take your point. I was pretty tired of all that red and gold in the dorm, and I'd seen what it looked like when Sirius did it in his room."

Draco gave a small shudder. "Hideous," he said, wrinkling up his nose.

Harry couldn't have agreed more, but a prickle of anger shot through him at the insult to his godfather. He knew that Sirius had been bravely determined to assert his own identity against monstrous opposition, and Malfoy's ill-mannered dismissal did not sit well with him.

"He had his reasons," said Harry crossly.

Draco seemed not to notice Harry's tone. "Mother said they never knew what happened to her cousin Regulus," said Draco. "That he disappeared. Auntie Burga was devastated."

That didn't sit well with Harry either. Walburga Black had not been devastated when Sirius left. "I know what happened to Regulus," said Harry. "Kreacher told me. You have a lot in common with him, actually," he said, his anger percolating to the surface.

Draco turned around to face Harry, frowning.

"You were both Slytherin Seekers," said Harry. "You both joined up with the Death Eaters at sixteen. And were both bloody proud of it too, until you found out what Voldemort was really like and then you were in too deep. Unlike you," Harry went on, relentlessly, "when Regulus discovered his mistake, he gave his life trying to stop Voldemort."

Draco paled and seemed to wilt where he stood, then anger flared again in his eyes. "You think it would be better if I'd died a useless death, Potter?" He turned away, but Harry caught the flash of hurt that had crossed his face. "I should have known better than to think you understood..."

"I understand perfectly," said Harry, coldly. "You wanted power and glory - just like your father - and you were willing to follow an evil madman to get it. And you were too much of a coward to fight him when you realised just what that entailed, even after you'd changed your mind."

"Too smart, you mean," snarled Draco. "I was too smart to try to fight him. You, he respected enough to duel. Me - he would have killed me without a second's hesitation if I'd given him the slightest reason." He took a ragged breath and turned back to face Harry. "You're right about one thing. I'm not like Regulus. I'm still alive." He paused for a heartbeat. "Or maybe you wish I wasn't?" he added, and the hurt was vivid on his face.

The terrible image of Cedric Diggory lying stilled forever in the graveyard at Little Hangleton flashed again before Harry's eyes and snuffed out all his righteous anger. He ran one hand through his hair in consternation. How could he have said such things to Malfoy just because he was insulted for Sirius's sake? Harry was forced to admit to himself that Draco had coped with the moment-to-moment uncertainty of living with Voldemort with more courage than Harry had ever given him credit for. Draco was facing him now, with hurt in his eyes and that awful question hanging in the air between them.

"No, of course not," said Harry, his voice suddenly hoarse. "I do understand... more than you know. I'm sorry." He sank down to sit cross-legged on the floor, amidst all the rubble of Regulus's wasted life, and put his head down in his hands. He tried to think where this had all gone wrong; for the most part, today, they'd got along quite well. What had happened just now was like watching a priceless porcelain vase, which one moment was safe upon the shelf and the next was irretrievably spinning and falling through the air; watching in disbelief as time seemed to stretch and stand still, helpless to stop it before it hit the floor and smashed into a thousand pieces. This relationship, this attempt at finding peace between them, was still so new, so fragile, so breakable. Harry hoped it was not too late to pick up the pieces. He really didn't want it to be too late...

Resolved to try again, Harry looked up. Draco was standing with his arms crossed over his chest, his face cast down and averted. He looked shattered, and Harry's heart did that stupid little flip again, the one it no doubt also did for kicked puppies. Especially when you're the one that's done the kicking, supplied the honest little voice in his head. "I'm sorry, Malfoy," he said again. "I was wrong to say you were a coward. I do understand how insignificant Voldemort thought everyone's life was but his own, and how dangerous it was to live with that day after day." He took a deep breath. "I'm glad you stayed alive."

Draco glanced at Harry then. He was standing stiffly, but at Harry's last words seemed to relent and after a long moment, sat down among the spilled drawers and old textbooks scattered everywhere. He picked up an old quill from the floor and turned it over and over in his hands.

"I don't think I could have done it," said Harry softly. "I would have run my mouth and he would have killed me ages ago, if I'd been in your position."

Draco gave a soft snort at that. "But you still think that's better than what I did," said Draco. "Even if you died, as long as you fought for what you believed in, you think that's better than keeping quiet and staying alive."

Unbidden, Dumbledore's words from the Waiting Place resurfaced in Harry's mind. ...there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying. "Yeah," said Harry, quietly. "I think that because that's how I am. Because I believe some things are worth dying for and because I've learned that dying isn't the worst thing that can happen to you."

There was doubt in the light grey eyes that met Harry's across the abandoned litter of Regulus's short life. "Easy for you to say, if you can't die," said Draco barely above a whisper. "Mother said she saw the Dark Lord cast the Killing Curse on you, but that when she came to check, you were still alive."

"That was complicated," said Harry, not wanting to get into an explanation of the Horcruxes or his mother's sacrifice right then. "And that was something that only existed between me and Voldemort. Of course I can die. I believed I was going to die when I went into the Forbidden Forest to meet him."

"And you went anyway." Draco shook his head, but his expression was full of curious interest now, as if he'd wanted to ask Harry about this all along.

"Yes, and I was terrified," said Harry. "But I believed that I had to die or Voldemort would never be defeated. I had to do it. Stopping him mattered to me more than me dying," he went on. "And believe me, I didn't want to die."

"I didn't want to die, either," said Draco, very softly. "I was terrified every day at home. I was afraid I might breathe wrong and he would kill me where I stood." He paused. "What was it like? When he cast the Killing Curse on you?"

"I went somewhere... for a little while... somewhere like where I saw your mother in my dream. It's like a

place where you wait after you die and before you go on, but it's a bit different every time. And maybe someone you know meets you there to help you go on... I dunno. I thought I was dead, but then Professor Dumbledore came, and he said I could go back. That I wasn't dead."

"And you said you'd had dreams of that place before my mother?"

"Yeah. Twice before your mum. I don't know what it means, or why it's happening. But it isn't just dreams. The people I see there are really dead, except for your mum, and she faded."

Draco sat in silence for a moment, twirling the old quill between his fingers. "We should find out what it means," he said finally. "There's a huge library back at the Manor. Maybe when it's safe to go back, we can find something there."

Harry stared at Draco, his heart gone suddenly light, and he wanted to laugh. First because Draco had said "we" and second because it had been such a Hermione thing to say, and he missed her. "Maybe so," he said, and then he smiled. "Yeah. Thanks."

They stood up. Draco accidentally kicked a broken ink bottle under the bed as he made his way out into the hall. He looked back through the doorway and shook his head. "Auntie Burga would have hated to see this," he said.

"I know," said Harry, as he led the way back down the stairs to their rooms on the third floor. "The whole house was in a terrible state. No one lived here for ten years, then Sirius came back, but he hated it here, so he didn't care. We cleaned it up somewhat two years ago, and Kreacher did a lot more last summer. But then I was on the run, and I've just come back. I want to fix it up, but I don't know much about taking care of houses."

Draco turned at the door to his bedroom and smiled a slow impish smile. "I can help you there," he said.

Harry grinned at Draco from his own doorway across the hall. He had heard that before, but this time he intended to take Draco up on the offer. "You're on," he said. Draco gave him a satisfied nod, then closed his door. Harry shut his door too, feeling pleased. This whole day had been one long roller coaster ride of

ups and downs, and he was more than ready to drop into bed. But as he got undressed and moved all his packages from the bed into the wardrobe to deal with later, he could not deny that it had felt good to talk to Malfoy about his dreams and dying. It felt good that they had found a way past the angry words that had come out tonight. It felt beyond good that both of them had managed to stay alive.

After he got into bed, he lay for a moment wondering if Molly had told him the truth, if Ginny really did miss him, or if that had been wishful thinking on her part. He supposed he was being stubborn, but he felt he'd tried, and that if Ginny wanted to see him again, she could let him know herself. He felt that Ginny was demanding that he understand her, without being willing to understand him herself. It didn't have to be that one of them was right and one of them was wrong. They just had to be willing to see each other's point of view and accept that they had different needs and work around that. It shouldn't be so... hard...

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The Waiting Place was a play park. It was a lovely, sunny place, with a slide and swings and bright green grass. Harry stood barefoot in the grass and turned in place, listening. Somewhere, out in the mist, someone was crying. For a moment, Harry felt rooted in place as he remembered the repulsive, flayed, child-like creature that had whimpered and cried here before. That one was gone, he reminded himself. This must be someone else, someone he could help.

He walked towards the sound, and the mist parted in front of him. He saw a path and a bench a short distance away, and a small figure huddled there, a little child, a boy. He knelt down and the child looked up, startled, and wiped his nose on the back of one sleeve.

"Hey," said Harry gently. "What's your name?"

"Edmund. Are you an angel?"

"No," said Harry. "I'm just Harry. I'm here to sit with you for a bit, if that's all right."

The child nodded and studied Harry, wide-eyed. "Why?" he asked.

"I dunno," said Harry honestly. "Would you like me to stay?"

The boy nodded again, and Harry sat down beside him on the bench. "Where are we?" he asked.

"My mum brings me here to play," said Edmund. Then his lower lip quivered. "I miss my mum..." he said in a trembling voice, and tears spilled down his face.

"I'm so sorry," said Harry, at a complete loss. A wave of emotion rose up in him, a memory of missing his own mum as a small child, of wanting something to hold for comfort, something he'd never been given... He wished he had something to give this child to comfort him. He thought of the small plush bear he'd bought for Teddy that was even now sitting on the dining table at home. If only he had something like that, he wished....

And it was there in his hand.

Edmund sniffled loudly. "You have a Teddy," he said.

"Yes, so I do," said Harry smiling. "He's yours if you want him."

"Mine?" said Edmund, and a small, wondering smile appeared on his tear-stained face.

Harry nodded. "Yes, this bear came here just for you."

Edmund reached out his small hand and took the bear and hugged it. After a moment, he looked back up

at Harry and said, "We can go find my Gran now."

"Okay," said Harry. He held out his arms, and the child came to him and put his arms around Harry's neck, and Harry stood and lifted him up. "Where should we go?" he asked.

Edmund pointed down the path, where the mist was thick and white and shining with light. "There," he said. "My Gran is there, but I can't see where she is, and I was afraid to go by myself."

"I can go with you now, if you like," said Harry.

"Yes, please," said Edmund, and he put his head down on Harry's shoulder with a sigh, as Harry stepped onto the path.

The mist was heavy but it parted for Harry as he followed the path into the light. He didn't walk far before he saw a shining figure waiting for him. The figure seemed to form and take shape as he got closer, and after a moment, Harry saw that it was a woman. "Are you Edmund's grandmother?" he asked when he came to the place where she stood.

"I am. Oh, my darling little boy," she said, with a sad smile. She reached out and stroked the hair back from Edmund's face.

Edmund lifted his head and reached out to her. "Gran!" he said. "Oh, Gran. I was all alone and couldn't find you, until the Harry-angel came."

Harry let him go into his grandmother's arms. Edmund still clutched the bear tightly.

Edmund's grandmother gave Harry a tremulous smile. "I can carry him on from here," she said. "Thank you."

Harry watched them walk away into the shining white mist until they disappeared. Then everything faded into white.

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Harry sat up in bed, astonished. It had happened again. He could almost still feel the little boy's arms around his neck, the weight of him in his arms. The little boy couldn't have been more than four years old. A pang went through Harry's heart. So young. Edmund. He wanted to remember that.

He lay back down, but couldn't fall asleep. Finally, with a sigh, he reached for his glasses on the bedside table and put them on, then picked up his wand and cast a silent Incendio to light a candle on the desk. He got up, padding barefoot into the dark hall, thinking there might be something to eat down in the kitchen, toast or tea or both that might help him sleep, wondering if he dared open Malfoy's door to check on him.

But he didn't have to.

"Aaaaaarrrrgggghhh!" The scream came from Malfoy's room. A second later, there was a crack and Malfoy's voice was swearing loudly.

Harry raced back into his bedroom, grabbed his wand from the bedside table, and ran back out into the hall. With a quick flick, he lit the gas lamp, and then started for Draco's door. But he'd only taken a step when it flew open and Draco marched out into the dark hall obviously incensed.

Draco stopped short when he saw Harry. "You! Did you put him up to this?"

"What? No!" said Harry. "What are you talking about? I just heard you scream. What happened?"

"That elf!" said Draco. "That Kreacher! He was in my room just now muttering something about "he's not like my brave Master Regulus, oh no he's not," and that woke me up and when I turned over, he had that bloody knife again... I swear, Potter, if this is your idea of a joke..."

Harry held up his hands, and barely managed not to laugh. Draco was a sight again, his hair all askew and wild, his eyes huge. He was wearing only pyjama trousers and was gripping his upper arms with both hands, his forearms crossed over his bare chest. And Harry was sure he looked no better, standing there in just his boxers... "I had nothing to do with it, Malfoy, I promise," said Harry. "I spoke to him after the bathroom incident. He told me he wouldn't..."

Then Harry had a sudden thought. "Er... he wasn't waving the knife, was he?" he asked.

"No, he wasn't waving it," said Draco. "He was holding it up like this, like he was going to murder me in my sleep, that's what he was doing." Draco had mimed a menacing pose, holding an imaginary knife up over his head. "What does waving have to do with anything?"

"Well, because he promised not to wave the knife at you and he didn't," said Harry. "I'll talk to him again in the morning."

"Oh, that's just brilliant," said Draco. He turned and stomped back into his room, and Harry heard violent rustling noises, then Draco reappeared carrying the pillow and bedding he'd pulled off the bed. "There's no way I'm going to be able to sleep in that room, now," he said. He marched across the hall with his stuff. "Just when I thought my life couldn't get any more fucked up..." he muttered, as he disappeared into Harry's room.

Harry stood for a gobsmacked moment in the hall listening to the sounds of Draco banging and rustling around in his room. Then he strode to the doorway and stared. Draco had pushed Harry's chair and desk back and was folding the bedding up into a narrow pallet on the floor. "Malfoy! What the hell...?"

"If he comes after me again, Potter," said Draco, "he'll have to do it with you here, too!" He sat down in the middle of the pallet, crossed his arms over his chest, and the look in his eyes under his wild hair just dared, dared, Harry to kick him out.

Harry opened his mouth and closed it again. He ran one hand through his own sticking-up hair and sighed. Then he put out the lamp in the hall, came into the room, and sat on the edge of his bed. "Okay, fine," he said, resigning himself now to what he was going to have to say. "You can sleep in here until Kreacher stops bothering you."

"I don't understand what's got into him," said Draco, frowning. "He was always nice to me before, even when I played tricks on him."

"He's old and he's been through a lot," said Harry, wondering if he was going to get any sleep at all tonight. "And your great-aunt ordered him to be nice to you. So he was nice, but when you played the tricks on him while he was grieving for his mistress, he resented it terribly. He's just getting even with you now because he doesn't have to obey your great-aunt any more."

Draco seemed to mull that over. "Then it's simple," he said. "You could order him to be nice to me, too."

"Yeah, I could," said Harry, "but I won't. I'll tell him not to bring that knife around you again, but you've got yourself into this, and you'll have to find a way to make it up to him. You could start by apologising..."

Draco looked mutinous. "Apologise. To a house-elf."

Harry shrugged. "It's up to you, Malfoy." He pulled off his glasses and set them on the bedside table, then got under his blankets. "I'm going to sleep now. Nox." The candle on the desk blew itself out. He heard Draco breathe out an exasperated sigh, then there were a few moments of quiet. Just when Harry was about to drift off, the rustling and fidgeting started from down on the floor. It seemed to go on and on and on...

"Malfoy!" Harry whispered. "What on earth are you doing down there?"

"The floor is too hard," came the furious whisper back. "I can't get comfortable."

"Oh, Merlin," said Harry, sorely tempted to borrow Kreacher's victory sword and use it himself. "Between you and my dreams, I'm not getting any sleep."

Draco stood up. In the moonlight from the windows, he looked like a ghost, pale and ethereal. "It's not like I'm getting any sleep either, Potter," he said. "But I'm not going back across the hall. It's creepy and dark and I keep thinking about my mother." He sounded tired and defeated.

It was dark, and Harry didn't have his glasses on so he couldn't see clearly anyway, but he would have bet anything that Malfoy had that kicked puppy look on his face again. Evidently it worked just as well when he was only imagining it. "Oh, all right," he heard himself saying. "You can sleep in the bed." It was a big bed, he reminded himself. Bigger than he'd ever had. There was no reason they had to get near each other...

He watched the pale, ghostly form of Draco pick up his pillow and pad around to the far side of the bed. The mattress dipped and then Draco was there in the bed with him, lying as close to the edge and away from Harry as possible. Harry closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and finally, finally, fell asleep.

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At some very early hour of the morning, Harry woke up. He came back to consciousness slowly, feeling warm and comfortable. Not just comfortable, his still-drowsy mind told him, comforted. It felt like someone was hugging him, and there was soft hair brushing his shoulder where his own hair wouldn't be, and he lay for a moment in that state, only half-awake, just feeling how nice it felt for someone to be hugging him. Finally he woke enough to wonder why... or who... because it was finally registering that someone really was there in bed with him, someone who was pressed against him all down his side... and that was actually rather startling so he woke up a little more... and remembered... Malfoy!

Harry didn't move a muscle but his eyes flew open, and sure enough, the bloody git was all snuggled up against him in the bed. Harry turned his head, carefully, just a little, so that he could see the windows. There was a pale pink glow showing in the pearl grey sky outside. Much too early to get up, then, he decided, and besides, he was still sleepy from having been kept up during the night. So he took a deep,

careful, breath, and thought about what he should do.

After considering the various consequences of several options, he decided to relax and go back to sleep. The idea of Malfoy waking up later and finding himself plastered all over Harry and being horrified was the deciding factor. It certainly was not because it felt so nice to stay where he was...

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The next time Harry woke, he was alone in bed. Even the bedding from across the hall that Draco had arranged on the floor was gone. Harry smirked to himself for a moment wondering how Malfoy had managed to sneak out of the bed without waking him. After taking a shower, he sorted through his purchases from yesterday and put on a new pair of jeans and a dark blue-green jumper. He even had a new pair of trainers to replace the tatty ones he'd worn all through his adventures of the last year. With new clothes and the new haircut, his first ever from the Wizarding barber in Diagon Alley, Harry felt almost new himself. So it was with a bounce in his step that he went downstairs to the kitchen for breakfast.

Draco was sitting at the table already, looking combed and presentable, but he didn't look happy. He was poking his spoon into a bowl of something thick and grey and lumpy. It took Harry a second to realise it was porridge - no doubt what Kreacher had given him for breakfast.

"Morning, Malfoy," said Harry. "Sleep okay?"

"Fine," said Draco, in a grumpy tone. "Just fine." Harry noticed with amusement that a faint pink blush crept up to colour Malfoy's face.

"Ah, there you are, Master Harry," croaked Kreacher, appearing from the pantry. "I'll have your breakfast ready in just a moment."

"Thank you, Kreacher," said Harry. "And I'm feeling very hungry this morning, so extra-large portions

would be wonderful."

"Yes, Master Harry!" The elf looked delighted.

Harry sat down at the table and nodded at Draco's bowl. "How's your porridge?"

Draco pushed it away with a scowl. "It tastes like it's got sand in it. It's horrible and lumpy and... gritty."

Harry fought down a grin. He glanced over at Kreacher who was busy at the stove. "So, did you apologise to him yet?" he whispered.

"No," said Draco in a furious whisper back. "I'm not -"

"Here's your tea, Master Harry." Kreacher set a cup of steaming tea at Harry's place. He went back to the stove and returned with a plate piled high with toast, a bowl of fresh strawberries, and another plate piled with rashers of bacon. "Would Master Harry like anything else?"

"No. Thank you, Kreacher, this looks wonderful." The old elf gave him a low bow. Harry turned back to find Draco staring at his plates of toast and bacon with an expression of outrage on his face. "I would consider sharing..." said Harry. "But only if you tell Kreacher you're sorry."

Draco sat for a minute, staring at his bowl of lumpy grey porridge with his face screwed up. Harry imagined some intense inner battle was raging inside that blond head. Then Draco rolled his eyes. "All right, fine," he muttered.

"Kreacher," called Harry. "Mr Draco has something he wants to say to you."

"Yes, Master Harry?" Kreacher reappeared from the boiler cupboard and came to stand near Draco.

"What does Mr Draco want now?"

Draco took a deep breath, then stood up and bowed to the old elf. "Mr Draco wants to tell Kreacher that he is very sorry for being such an insensitive child when he was five," said Draco. "Auntie Burga was like a grandmother to me," he went on, his demeanour completely genuine. "I loved your mistress very much, and I was frightened and angry when she was dying. I took my anger out on you, and that was wrong. I'm sorry. I don't deserve it, but I hope you will forgive me." He gave Kreacher another bow and sat back down.

Harry was impressed. He hadn't expected anything half as graceful as that. He looked over at Kreacher to see that the elf was trembling.

"Mr Draco is apologising to Kreacher?" croaked Kreacher. "Mr Draco loved Mistress?" His great grey eyes were tearful.

"Yes, I am apologising, and yes, I loved Auntie Burga," said Draco sincerely. "She used to tell me such interesting stories of the Black family history. I was wondering... do you remember any of those stories, Kreacher? I would love to hear them again."

"Oh, yes, Mr Draco! Kreacher is remembering those stories very well. Kreacher would be glad to tell them to Mr Draco." He gave Draco a bow, not as low as he did for Harry, but a definite bow, nonetheless.

"Thank you, Kreacher," said Harry. "I think I would like to hear those stories too." He smiled when the elf gave a small squeak of delight and bowed low to him. "And I hope there won't be any more need for you to bother Mr Draco while he is sleeping, like last night..."

Kreacher's tearful face took on a slightly shifty expression. "Kreacher did not wave the victory sword, Master Harry."

"No, I know you didn't, but let's keep the victory sword put away unless there is danger, okay?"

"Yes, Master Harry. If there is danger, Kreacher will be ready." He gave Harry another low bow and scuttled off back into the boiler cupboard.

Draco gave a sigh of relief. "Thank Merlin for that," he said.

"That was very well done, Malfoy," said Harry. "I'm actually impressed." He drew his wand and Summoned a plate from the ancient dresser that held the china, and then gave Draco a generous portion of his own breakfast. "And I'm going to remember that you can be bought with toast and bacon," he added, grinning.

"Oh, shut up," said Draco. But he grinned back. "Where's the marmalade."

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After breakfast they Apparated to St Mungo's so that Draco could check on his parents. There was a plump middle-aged witch sitting on the tattered sofa in the waiting area this morning, so Harry sat in one of the armchairs across the room. After about ten minutes another witch, who looked to be about Molly's age, Harry thought, came out of the ward and rushed over to sit with the witch on the sofa. And though he didn't intend to eavesdrop, Harry couldn't help overhearing their whispered conversation.

"Oh, Ethel, I'm so relieved. My Thomas is going to be fine, thank Merlin," said the one who had come in from the ward. "But oh," she went on, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief, "there was just the saddest thing happened last night. I was upstairs in the tearoom earlier and heard the poor young couple there talking about how they lost their little son during the night. He was just a wee lad of four. That young mother was distraught with grief, she was. I felt just terrible, hearing her sobbing."

Harry stood up, a wave of mixed horror and anxiety running through him as his dream came back to him with the force of a Bludger to the gut. "Excuse me..." he said. "I'm sorry, but do you know where the parents of the little boy are now?"

"They were waiting upstairs in the tearoom for the Healer who makes the funeral arrangements," said the witch who had been speaking before. "It was only a short time ago that I saw them."

"Thank you," said Harry. He rushed from the room and took the stairs two at a time. It wasn't hard to spot the young couple when he got there. They were huddled together and one of the Healers in lime-green was speaking to them in a low consoling voice. They looked devastated and exhausted. Harry froze in indecision. He didn't know if he should speak to them or not.

The door opened behind him and a second later Draco stood beside him. "Those witches told me you came up here," he said. Then his expression changed to interest and concern when he saw Harry's face. "What?" he whispered. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I guess I have, in a way," said Harry. "I had another dream last night. A little boy died. I've just found out those are his parents." He nodded at the couple across the room. "I don't know if I should tell them or not..."

The Healer was standing up, taking his leave.

Draco's hand was suddenly in the middle of his back, pushing him forward. "You have to tell them," he whispered back. "They'd want to know."

"Yeah," said Harry. He took a steadying breath. "Right." He walked slowly across the room, passing the Healer as he went. "Excuse me," he said softly, when he reached the table. "I'm sorry to intrude..." He looked into both of their sad, careworn faces and got his courage back. "Was your son named Edmund?"

"Yes," said the father, giving Harry a puzzled look. "How did you...?" Harry saw the man's eyes travel up to his forehead and saw that moment of surprised recognition register in them. "Aren't you...?"

"Harry Potter, yes, sir," said Harry. "I have something to tell you about Edmund, if that's okay." They nodded, still puzzled, and Harry sat down in the chair the Healer had vacated. "I had a dream last night,"

he said. "I met Edmund in a play park. It was a pretty place, sunny, the grass was very green, and there was a slide, and swings."

The young mother gave a soft cry. "That's the park a block from our flat," she whispered. "We went there on my afternoons off."

Harry nodded. "He told me that," said Harry. "He told me he missed you, too," he added. "He was sitting on a bench when I saw him, and he said that he needed to find his grandmother, but was afraid to go alone. So I carried him down the path and we met a woman. He called her 'Gran'... and she called him 'my darling little boy' and she took him and they went on together down the path."

"Oh," breathed the young mother. Tears were streaming down her face. "That was my mum. She just died a few months ago... Oh..." She paused for a moment to wipe her eyes and blow her nose. "Was Edmund... did he look all right... was he happy...?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Harry. "He was sad, before, but he looked well, and he was smiling and glad when we found his Gran."

"Oh, thank you, Mr Potter," she sniffled. "You have no idea how that puts my mind to rest."

"Thank you, Mr Potter," said her husband. "It was good of you to take an interest."

"It's Harry," said Harry, standing up. "And it was no trouble. I'm so very sorry for your loss."

The young father stretched out his hand. "Thank you, Harry."

Harry shook hands with the man, then turned back to the boy's mother to say goodbye, but with another soft cry, she jumped up and came around the table, and threw her arms around Harry's neck.

For a second, her wet face pressed against his cheek and she whispered in his ear. "I told little Edmund that he would find an angel to help him. And I was right, wasn't I? I was right!" She pulled back to gaze into Harry's face. "Thank you, Harry."

Harry felt his face go warm, and he nodded. When she let him go, he had a lump in his throat. Draco was waiting for him near the door and they went down the stairs together. When they got to the landing outside the fourth floor corridor, Draco took hold of his wrist. His expression was thoughtful and curious.

"This helping people stuff just never stops for you, does it?" said Draco.

"So it would seem," said Harry, a bit defensive. "It just finds me, whether I want it to or not."

"I'm not complaining, you understand," said Draco. "Not any more, that is." He studied Harry face with a rueful smile. "I can't even think about what would have happened if you hadn't dreamed about my mother that night." He paused, looking intently interested. "These dreams you're having, they're real, aren't they? You really are meeting dead people."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I dunno why, though. Are you ready?" At Draco's nod, Harry Apparated them both back to the top step at number twelve Grimmauld Place.

They paused in the entrance hall, taking a moment to recover from the front door traps, and then Harry gasped in surprise. He walked into the dining room and began sorting through the packages on the table, the gifts he'd bought yesterday for Teddy. "Do you remember seeing a plush bear here?" he asked Draco. "It was right here. And now it's gone..." He trailed off as realisation hit.

"I remember it," Draco was saying. "It was a furry brown one with a tartan bow."

"I gave it to that little boy in my dream last night," said Harry, suddenly breathless. "I wished for it in my dream, and it appeared there in my hand. And now it's not here!"

"Bloody hell, Potter," whispered Draco. His stunned expression matched Harry's perfectly.

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Two Aurors accompanied Harry and Draco, first to Nappies & Prams Ltd in Diagon Alley so that Harry could purchase another Teddy bear, and then to Andromeda Tonks's home. Andromeda opened the door with the baby in her arms, and Harry had meant to introduce Draco straight away, but that hadn't been necessary.

Andromeda had known him instantly. "Draco?" she'd said, with a gasp of surprise. "Oh, it is! This is wonderful! Come in. Come in!" And she had ushered Harry and Draco into the house. The two Aurors took up positions outside the door.

"Why the Aurors," she asked, as she led them into the sitting room where Harry had recovered from the motorcycle crash with Hagrid last summer. "Has something happened?" Harry set all his packages on the sofa, and Andromeda smiled at him. "Oh, Harry, that is sweet of you. But he's much too little for a broom." Then she looked from Harry to Draco and took a deep breath. "Tell me," she said.

While Harry bounced baby Teddy, he and Draco took turns telling the story of the attack at Malfoy Manor. Harry could tell that Andromeda's intermittent exclamations of "Oh, you poor boy" were going long ways toward winning Draco's heart. At the end of the story, she leaned forward and put her hand on Draco's knee. "I'm your family," she said, "whatever happens. You can always count on that." Then she paused. "Do you think I could visit Cissy in hospital? Do you think she would mind, now that things are... different?"

"I don't know," said Draco, honestly. "But I think she might like that. I would like that," he added. "Thank you." He looked hopeful again and a little less anxious.

"We'll come back and visit again in a few days," said Harry when they were leaving. "Maybe we'll have better news."

Back at Grimmauld Place, Harry decided that he'd had enough of the Tongue-Tying Curse and Dumbledore's dusty apparition flying at him every time he came in the door. Consulting Bill and his curse-breaking expertise was a good excuse for visiting the Weasleys, so he left Draco in the drawing room with the medical book he'd borrowed, and Apparated with one of the Aurors to the Burrow. Bill readily agreed to come in the morning and see what he could do, and then Harry chatted with Molly for a few minutes in the kitchen.

"Oh, Harry! There you are at last," said Molly. She was putting an enormous roast into the oven. "I was just going to send you an owl," she went on. "We heard from Ron and Hermione about an hour ago. It only took a day for it to get to us since they sent it by International Portkey Post. The Transcontinental Relay Owl would have taken a week. Here," she said, wiping her hands on her apron and picking up a long piece of parchment from the kitchen table. "You can read it now yourself."

Harry read through Hermione's letter with a smile on his face. They'd been able to find her parents without difficulty, and she had successfully removed the enchantment she'd put on their memories. The resulting altercation had been expected, and she and Ron had finally calmed the horrified Grangers with solemn promises never to do anything of the sort again. However, as it turned out, the Grangers loved Australia and were planning to stay. Hermione sent her love to Harry, and promised to write again soon. They were going to stay a little longer than planned since her parents would not be returning with them.

"Harry, love, please stay for dinner," said Molly when he finished reading. "I hate to think of you rattling around in that big place all alone with only that horrible old house-elf for company."

"I'm not..." started Harry and stopped. He'd forgotten that the Weasleys had no idea of what had happened at Malfoy Manor or that he had Draco staying with him. He wasn't sure he wanted to tell them either, which meant Draco would have to stay out of sight while Bill was there tomorrow. Or to hell with it. They might all just have to bloody well cope...

"I'm not... rattling," he said finally. "And Kreacher's not horrible, not any more. He's really improved."

Molly looked doubtful, but she smiled. "I'm glad to hear it," she said. "But are you eating enough? He can't be much of a cook."

"He is, actually," said Harry, and had the distinct impression that Molly was disappointed.

But then she brightened. "I know Ginny will want to see you. I think she's outside playing Quick Quidditch with George."

"Right," said Harry. Knowing he could not put it off any longer, he went to find Ginny.

Ginny and George were walking back from the orchard behind the garden, brooms over their shoulders, the Snitch fluttering helplessly in Ginny's hand, when Harry walked out into the back garden. "Hey," he said, mustering as much cheerfulness as he could manage.

"Harry!" said George, and he whistled. "New clothes? New haircut? Who are you trying to impress?" And he winked.

"Er..." said Harry. He looked at Ginny and felt his face burning. "I thought we might talk?" he said.

"Don't let me stop you," said George, standing right there grinning. Harry and Ginny both turned to glare at him, and he threw up his hands. "All right! I know when I'm not wanted!"

"And no Extendable Ears," shouted Ginny after his retreating back. Harry heard him laugh as the door shut behind him.

"Seems like he's doing okay," said Harry. He walked over to the bench at the foot of the garden and sat down. Ginny followed after a moment and sat beside him. She leaned her broom against the fence behind the bench. The Snitch in her hand had closed.

"We're doing all right," she said, "but there are moments... It just catches you off guard, you know? You think of him like he's in the next room and then suddenly you realise, he's gone..."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I know." He took a deep breath and let the words he wanted to say come out. "Gin, I miss you. I've missed you all year. And I know this is a difficult time for you, and I'm not trying to rush you, but I need to know... something. Can you just tell me if you think there's any chance we'll get back together?"

She dropped her head and her hair fell like a curtain between them. "It's been pretty hard to tell that you missed me," she said. "You left right after Fred's funeral, and I haven't heard a word since." She lifted her head and shook back her hair, then faced Harry. "But, oh yeah, you sent flowers to my mum."

"I sent flowers to your mum for all of you, Ginny. And if you recall, I tried to get you to come walk with me after the funeral and you refused to budge from the kitchen."

"Because right after the funeral you left me standing alone and went off with Ron and Hermione!"

"They were leaving for Australia!"

"But you always do that! You leave me alone to go off somewhere with them!" Her eyes were swimming with tears. "And I thought you would stay for dinner that night. I thought we'd be able to talk later. But you just left. And it's been days!"

"Ginny, I left because you wouldn't talk to me. Have you any idea how embarrassing it was to have your mother standing there telling you to go, and you wouldn't? I wasn't going to stay for dinner. It seemed pretty clear you didn't want me there." He sighed. "And I'm sorry it's been days. I've been really busy... and I had hoped you would let me know you wanted me to come back."

"Busy," she repeated, wiping her eyes with the back of her wrist. "Shopping for clothes?"

"For one thing." Harry ignored the sarcasm, but she wasn't making it easy. "I've been having these dreams, of people who died. Like I did with Fred." He desperately wanted to talk to her about this. He wanted her to understand what he was feeling and for her to help him figure out what the dreams

meant. "I have no idea why, but it's happened almost every night. Last night it was a little boy who died, Gin. He was only four. I talked to his parents this morning."

"Don't you think that's kind of creepy, Harry?"

"I... No, it wasn't creepy. It was... kind of amazing. And I had a plush bear that I got for Teddy, but it disappeared..." He trailed off, because it sounded crazy and she was looking at him like he'd sprouted antlers or antennae. And suddenly he realised that he was used to doing this with Ron and Hermione, not Ginny. And while Ron and Hermione had often thought Harry had crazy ideas, they did try to understand what he felt, and help him figure out what was happening. He suddenly missed them very much, and thought maybe Ginny just might have a point.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I should have asked how you've been doing."

"Not great," she said. "I've been trying to do stuff with George so he doesn't feel so alone, but I've been feeling pretty alone myself."

"I'm sorry," said Harry again. He wanted to tell her she could come visit him at Grimmauld Place but there was the problem of Draco being there.

"Look," she said, and this time there was no anger or sarcasm in her voice. "It's been hard, this year. For everyone. Especially you, and I know that. I just felt left out of so much, and I'm not good at having my feelings hurt. Maybe I need a little more time, that's all... to sort things out."

"Sure," said Harry, but his heart sank. "I can do that, Gin. But let me know, okay? Let me know when you decide what you want." He stood up. He was just going to go, and it was not the end, but somehow it felt like it. "I'll see you soon, then, yeah?"

She stood too, and picked up her broom, and for a heartbeat Harry thought she might kiss him goodbye, but she shrugged and said, "I should go get cleaned up before dinner." And then Harry was alone with the door to the house banging shut behind her, and he Disapparated before he remembered about the

Auror he was supposed to be with.

He remembered the Auror as soon as he Apparated alone to the top step at Grimmauld Place. "Sorry," he said to the Auror still on guard there. "I left him at the Burrow."

The Auror, he thought it was Jenkins again, waved him into the house. "He'll figure it out and be along soon enough, don't you worry."

So Harry went in and went upstairs. He found Draco sitting in the drawing room right where he'd left him, reading that book. Harry flopped down in the armchair with a huff, and closed his eyes. He was confused and hurt by Ginny's behaviour, and more than a little convinced that they'd just broken up for good, even if it hadn't been said.

"Trouble with the Weasels?" said Draco.

Harry gave Malfoy a scathing glance. "Don't call them that," he said. "And no." Then after a second, he sighed. "Yes. But I don't want to talk about it."

"Fine," said Draco. He was quiet for a minute, and Harry heard him turn a page.

"That must be an interesting book. I don't think you've moved an inch since I left," said Harry, casting about for something to talk about that didn't involve the Weasleys.

"It is," said Draco, and his voice was so earnest and filled with enthusiasm that Harry opened his eyes and looked over at him. Draco glanced up at Harry for a second. "A lot of it is still theory, or experimental," said Draco, "but it's fascinating."

There was silence for a long moment. Harry felt a wave of prickly unreality pass over him. Where was the snotty bully Malfoy had always been? When had the git stopped being such a git?

"However, you might like to know," said Draco, in a perfectly matter-of-fact, deadpan voice, "that I have moved. While you were gone, Kreacher burst in here waving that bloody carving knife again and chased me all over the house. The only place I was safe was hanging from the chandelier in the front hall, which was very tricky and caused a lot of noise, so Auntie Burga's portrait woke up and started singing Celestina Warbeck ballads and Kreacher whipped off his tea towel and croaked along and did some kind of erotic elfin sword dance up and down the stairs naked. It was a truly grotesque experience." He paused for moment and turned another page. "I just thought you should know..."

Harry tried not to laugh. He was really feeling much too out of sorts to give in to it, but imagining Kreacher chasing Malfoy through the house waving that bloody victory sword... and the rest of it... he couldn't help it. He gave a sputtered snort, then a chuckle, then he laid his head back and laughed helplessly. "I'll bet you screamed like a girl," Harry said, when he could talk.

Draco was looking quite pleased with himself, though he pretended to be offended at that. "No need to be insulting, Potter," he said. "It was a very manly scream."

Kreacher popped into the room at that moment to announce that dinner was ready. Just looking at the elf made Harry laugh more.

"Ah, Master Harry is being funny, again," muttered Kreacher. "Mr Draco is a proper gentleman. Mr Draco is being very nice to Kreacher now, yes he is."

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After dinner, which was a superb shepherd's pie followed by a delicious custard tart, Harry was feeling somewhat better. To keep his mind off Ginny, he brought up the subject of the house. "Kreacher," he said. "I want to redecorate the house and make repairs. Would that be all right with you?"

"Oh, yes, Master Harry," said the elf. "Kreacher can only do so much with cleaning. It takes wizard magic

to keep the house repaired."

"And I can help you with that," said Draco. "I had to learn architectural restoration and household decorating spells for the Manor. I can teach you."

"Right," said Harry. "Thanks." He turned back to Kreacher. "But I don't want to disturb Regulus's and Sirius's rooms. Would it be possible for you to set everything back in order in those rooms, like they were before they were searched?"

"Yes, Master Harry. Kreacher can do that." The elf looked teary again.

Harry smiled. "Let's start with the drawing room then," he said to Draco.

It was slow, but Harry made good progress with the spells. First, Draco taught him how to bond his magic to the house so that it truly became his house, so that he was attuned to its structure and repair needs. It was a subtle thing, but Harry found he could sense the cracks in the walls, the broken window panes, even when he couldn't see them behind the old wallpaper and drapes.

They went about the drawing room, inch by inch, repairing each of these damaged areas. Draco taught him spells other than Reparo that worked better for architectural structures. Soon, to Harry's new senses, the room had a solid, whole feeling to it. He grinned at Draco. Now, for the first time, the place was really beginning to feel like home to him.

Sirius, he realised with sudden insight, had probably never done this. Whether that was by choice, or whether his godfather had never learned the spells, it was clear to Harry that Sirius could not have hated the house so much if he had done these spells himself.

Harry agreed that perhaps it was time to replace some things in the room rather than restore them. Draco knew spells to refurbish the furniture and fabrics, but there was nothing they could do to alter the snake design woven into the carpet. The drapes too, were dark and heavy and not to Harry's liking.

"When Mother wakes up," said Draco. "If she wakes up," he amended softly, "we can ask her where the best places are to purchase carpets and drapes."

Harry stared at him for a moment, and there it was, that funny little flip of his heart again. For the first time Harry realised that this new relationship he was forming with Draco might not end when Narcissa woke up, or when Yaxley was finally caught. And it suddenly seemed odd, even though Draco had only been in the house two days, it seemed wrong to think that Draco might go back to living in the Manor and not here with Harry. It was surreal, the way they had so quickly come to act normal around each other.

Harry went to bed that night, tired, but pleased with what they had accomplished. He'd even managed not to think of Ginny for most of the evening.

Draco had disappeared into his room, but come out a short time later to stand in Harry's doorway in his pyjama trousers, his pillow hugged tightly to his chest. He looked defensive and embarrassed. "I can't sleep in there," he said. "I keep seeing my mother in there."

"It's all right," said Harry. "I told you. You can stay in here, if you need to."

Draco nodded, and came around to slip under the blankets on the far side of the bed. He lay on his back, his hands folded over his chest.

Harry put out the gas lamp with a wave of his wand, then set the wand and his glasses on the table by the bed. Draco, he noticed, had put his wand under his pillow. The moonlight streaming in the windows lit the room just enough to see by.

"I've been wondering about the wands," said Draco quietly. "Mine seems to work pretty well most of the time, but it doesn't feel quite right. Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense," said Harry, who had had to use several different wands over the last year. "It's like the

connection is missing. It's like the spells you taught me tonight that connect me to the house. It feels like the house is really mine now, like I belong."

"Right," said Draco. He put his hand under his pillow and pulled out the hawthorn wand. "Do you think there's any way it will ever be mine again, without me fighting you, I mean?"

"I dunno," said Harry. "We could ask Mr Ollivander."

"I doubt he'll want to speak to me," said Draco, and Harry heard a touch of bitterness in his voice.

"He'll speak to me, though," said Harry. "I can ask him. But I have no idea where he is."

"You could send an owl," said Draco, sounding hopeful again. "Owls always know."

Harry sucked in a sharp breath. It still hit him sometimes, this sharp pain in his chest from missing Hedwig. He breathed the air out in a long sigh. He needed an owl. He was used to having an owl and he was going to have to face the fact that it was time to get a new one. But it hurt.

"What happened to that snowy owl you had," said Draco, and for a moment Harry felt it was the most insensitive question possible. Then he reminded himself that Draco had no way of knowing, and probably more likely no notion of how attached Harry had been to Hedwig, how she had felt like his only friend over the long summers at Privet Drive.

"She was killed during one of the first battles with Voldemort," he whispered, not trusting his voice.

"The Dark Lord killed ours, too," whispered Draco back. "He fed it to that snake. My Aunt Bella thought it was hilarious..."

"Oh, bloody hell," whispered Harry. It occurred to him then, that Draco's memories of the last year might

be worse than his own.

They were silent for a minute, then Harry made a decision. "I'm going to Diagon Alley tomorrow," he said. "I'm going to get a new owl, and we'll write to Ollivander about your wand."

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Harry stirred in the darkness suddenly, knowing something had woken him, that something felt different in the heavy silence of the room. Still half-asleep, he expected the memory of a dream, another visit to the Waiting Place to surface, but he didn't remember dreaming. Then a muffled sobbing breath brought him alert. "Malfoy?" he said, his voice soft, slurred with sleep. "Are you -"

"Shut up, Potter. Just shut up." The tears in Draco's voice answered Harry's unspoken question.

"Look, Malfoy," said Harry, an edge of sleepy exasperation creeping into his tone. "I really don't care if you're crying. I know what it's like to -"

"No you don't! You don't know anything!" said Draco in a furious whisper. "You don't know what it's like to hear your mother screaming -"

Harry sat straight up, sheets twisting in his fists. "Oh, don't I? That's what I hear every time I'm near a Dementor - my mother screaming as Voldemort killed her. I was barely over a year old but I remembered that!"

Draco groaned softly. In the pale moonlight, Harry saw him put one arm up to cover his eyes, and Harry recalled all the callous teasing Draco had inflicted on him over the Dementors in Third Year. Silence fell between them, interrupted only by Draco's intermittent inelegant sniffles. But that one soft groan had told Harry that Draco had remembered the teasing too. Harry lay back down with a sigh.

"I didn't know," said Draco finally, barely audible.

"Don't worry about it," said Harry.

Harry was almost asleep again when one last whisper came out of the darkness. "Do you ever forget . . . the screams?"

"No," whispered Harry, and turned over, his back to Draco.

When Harry woke in the morning, Draco was gone. And Harry lay in the bed for several long minutes horrified at the realisation that he was disappointed. It seemed that somewhere, in the back of his mind, he had looked forward to a repeat of the comfortable, comforting feeling that Draco's unintentional snuggling presence had given him yesterday. Obviously, he reasoned, it was only because he missed Ginny...

Well, there was one good thing about this morning, he thought. He had not dreamed of the Waiting Place.

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When Harry got downstairs to the kitchen for breakfast, he found Draco already sitting at the table, reading his book. He had his own plate of toast this morning, and though he smirked at Harry to acknowledge his triumph over Kreacher's dislike, it was a weak effort and he looked tired and sad.

Neither of them mentioned the incident that had occurred during the night, and that was fine with Harry. He really didn't want to think too much about Draco sleeping in his bed. He had not attached any importance to it at all when he'd first made the offer. He was used to sleeping in a dorm with other boys, used to not worrying about privacy, and understood about not wanting to be alone with bad memories.

But after his realisation this morning, well... Now it was just a little weird.

They split up that morning and one of the Aurors on guard outside the house took Draco to St Mungo's. Draco planned to stay at the hospital until Bill Weasley was finished working on the traps inside the front door. They didn't know how long the curse-breaking would take, so Kreacher packed Draco a bag of sandwiches in case he had to stay at the hospital late into the afternoon.

Harry intended to shop for a new owl and be home before Bill arrived, so the other Auror accompanied Harry to the Eeylops Owl Emporium in Diagon Alley. Harry had only been inside the Owl Emporium twice before, but it was just as he remembered it. The interior of the shop was one large, high-ceilinged, dimly lit room, filled with the sounds of rustling feathers and a cacophony of hoots and screeches. Cages lined one wall from floor to ceiling, and owls of all kinds perched in a great tree-like structure in the centre of the room.

Harry gazed up at all the owls, as seemingly hundreds of round, jewel-coloured eyes stared back, and wondered how on earth he was going to choose. All he knew was that he didn't want another snowy owl that would constantly remind him of Hedwig. Then there was a sudden flurry of wings and Harry felt the familiar rush of air and grip of talons on his shoulder. He raised his arm and the owl walked down to his forearm, and Harry grinned.

Facing him was a lovely white-faced barn owl with striking russet and grey markings on its back and wings. The owl bobbed and twittered and Harry's grin widened. "Hello, there," he said, his heart taken instantly with the lovely oval face and intelligent black eyes.

The store owner came out from the back and then stopped short. "Well I never," he said. "Mr Potter, is it?"

"Yes," said Harry. "I came to pick out a new owl, but this one seems to have picked me."

"They're a bit like wands, that way," said the storekeeper with a laugh, as he walked over to Harry, then he raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Well I never," he said again. "I've had that owl for going on six months and he's never shown the slightest interest in anyone before. Always knew he was a smart one,

though. Guess he was waiting for you."

The owl walked back up Harry's arm to his shoulder. He butted his head against Harry's cheek and gave a soft twitter in Harry's ear. Harry reached up to scratch him under the chin. "Guess this is the one, then," he said with a smile, and as easy as that, Harry had a new owl.

The storekeeper helped Harry pick out a roomy cage and a large indoor perch, and Harry purchased two flavours of owl treats - mouse and vole. Now all he had to do was think of a name for his new owl...

Back at Grimmauld Place, Harry introduced the owl to Kreacher. Kreacher seemed quite excited to see an owl again in the house, the last one having belonged to Walburga's husband Orion. It had been an eagle owl named Thor, Kreacher told him with much admiration. They set the cage on a table in the drawing room and the perch stand near the front windows. The owl was happily examining the view, twittering and bobbing excitedly at Harry when Bill arrived. Harry gave the owl a treat and went to answer the door.

"Mad Eye set this up?" asked Bill after he'd come in and experienced the traps for himself. He whistled. "I can see why you want to remove them."

"Yeah," said Harry. "Do you think you can do it?"

Bill did some complicated diagnostic spell work, then turned back to Harry. "It's a complex set of spells. Old Mad Eye knew what he was doing, but I think I can handle it. If not, I'll get someone here who can. It may take me a couple of hours..."

"That's fine," said Harry. "I'll be upstairs in the drawing room. I have a letter to write."

So while Bill worked downstairs in the entrance hall, Harry sat upstairs and wrote a letter to Mr Ollivander. He reminded the wandmaker of their conversation in Shell Cottage about how wands that are won by force will change allegiance. He wrote:

If a wand has been taken by force and has switched allegiance to a new master, is there any way to return the wand's allegiance to the original owner without fighting another duel? If you can give me any advice in this matter, sir, it will be very much appreciated.

He signed his name then rolled the small piece of parchment up, tied it, and approached the little barn owl. "Ready to take this?" he asked.

The owl jumped to his arm and held out one leg. Harry grinned and tied the letter to the owl's leg. "All right," he said. "Take that to Mr Ollivander and you can wait for a reply if he will send one right away."

The owl spread its long wings and took off out the window. Harry watched it disappear over the rooftops in the distance, and hoped he would hear back from Ollivander soon. Then he went down and sat on the steps to watch Bill work. As he sat, he noticed that the curtains were still drawn over Mrs Black's portrait. In fact, Harry hadn't heard her at all since Draco had told her to rest and that he'd take care of things. That, in and of itself, was a definite improvement.

It did indeed take almost two hours before Bill cast a final spell and grinned at Harry. "I think that's done it," he said. "If you want to go out and try coming back in again, we'll give it a test."

"Right," said Harry. He went out the door and closed it, waved to the Auror on guard, then opened the door with a tap of his wand and came back in. Nothing. No Tongue-Tying Curse, no flying dust Dumbledore, just the dark, gloomy hallway with its faded, peeling wallpaper and threadbare carpets. "This is great!" said Harry, giving Bill a wide smile. "Thank you!"

"My pleasure," said Bill. "I'm glad to see you're starting to fix the place up. Sirius let it get into such a terrible state. I always thought it could be quite nice."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I didn't expect it, but I'm starting to enjoy it now."

"Good luck with it then," said Bill and they shook hands. "Don't be a stranger at the Burrow, though, just

because you've got your own place."

"I won't," said Harry, and felt a heavy lump settle in his stomach at that. He hoped that would be true. The Weasleys were his family, and he wanted things to stay that way, regardless of what happened between himself and Ginny.

When Bill was gone, Harry went down to the kitchen and ate leftover shepherd's pie for lunch. Then he Apparated to St Mungo's to check on Draco. The fourth floor waiting area was empty, and Harry sat for about five minutes on the tattered sofa there, wondering how he could let Malfoy know that he was here. There didn't seem to be anyone he could ask, so after a moment's hesitation, he slipped through the door into the ward to look for Draco.

Luckily, he didn't have to look far. He found Draco sitting beside his mother's bed in the second room on the left down the corridor. Draco was bent over the book in his lap, one hand holding the page open, his other hand holding his mother's hand on the bed. Harry's heart did that curious little warm flip again, and without thinking, he smiled. It was a fleeting smile that faded as his gaze went to Narcissa Malfoy lying deathly still and pale on the bed. "Hey," Harry said quietly from the doorway. "No change yet?"

Draco looked up and closed his book. He shook his head. "No," he said with a sigh. There was a sad, discouraged look in his grey eyes that tugged sharply at Harry's heart. "But Healer Pye has an idea for a potion he wants to try," said Draco. He stood and gently released his mother's hand. "It's a tricky combination of Invigoration Draught and Strengthening Solution with Mandrake Root. It will also be difficult to administer because she can't drink it, and the effects may be slow and unpredictable, maybe even dangerous. I'll have to give permission in writing before they try it."

"Are you going to do it?" asked Harry.

Draco stood looking down on his mother for a long moment before he replied. "I don't know," he said. "Healer Pye is concerned that she's been unconscious this long, but as long as she stays stable physically, he thinks we can wait. He still thinks it's better to let her come out of it on her own." Draco looked back at Harry, his face clouded with worry. "But if she doesn't wake up in ten days, he thinks we should intervene."

Harry counted backwards in his mind to the night he'd dreamed of Mrs Malfoy in the Waiting Place. "That's a week from today," he said. "I'm sure she'll come out of it by then." He tried to sound positive and reassuring, and Draco gave him a wan half-smile as he picked up a stack of several books from the bedside table. "More books, Malfoy?" asked Harry. "You're really getting interested in this Healing stuff, aren't you?"

"It's not stuff, Potter, and yes, I am," replied Draco. He took a last lingering glance at his mother, then came out into the corridor. He turned to Harry. "I need to check on Father," he said. "I got so involved in this book I was reading, I haven't been down to see him yet."

Harry noticed that Draco's face had taken on a faint pink blush when he mentioned his father, and that he had looked away, not meeting Harry's eyes. "That's fine," said Harry. "I can go back to the waiting room... or I can go up and have some tea if you're going to be very long."

Draco hesitated. "No," he said. "I think you should see him. I -" He paused, evidently thinking hard about what he was about to say. "The Healers are making good progress with him. They think he will remember everything eventually, but..." Draco hesitated again and finally looked up to meet Harry's eyes. "But Healer McFarland told me that what we teach him now can alter his emotional response to those memories. And I know you have no reason to care about what happens to my father, but I was hoping... you might visit him."

"Er..." said Harry. He did not want to see Lucius Malfoy. But Draco had that look on his face that had started snagging Harry's heart, and really, Harry thought to himself, he was not ever, ever in life going to let Draco know how effective that look was, because if it was making Harry consider visiting Lucius Malfoy, then it was dangerous. "I dunno," said Harry. "I'm sure he won't want to see me."

"But that's just it," said Draco. "He doesn't know that yet. He won't know you at all, and if he starts to like you now, it'll change how he feels about the things he did, once he remembers them."

Harry stared at Draco, stunned. "You want me to visit your father, and make him... like me?"

Draco's face had gone pink again, and he was frowning. "Yes," he said. "It could make a difference. But if you don't want to, then forget I said anything." He turned away and started down the corridor. "I won't

be long. I'll see you back in the waiting room."

There was hurt and disappointment in Draco's voice and Harry winced when he heard it. He watched Draco walk away for about five seconds before he called out. "Wait." Draco came to a stop and Harry, rolling his eyes at himself and this evil power Draco had somehow acquired over him, walked down the corridor to catch up. "Tell me again, why this is important?" he asked, when he was beside Draco. "I don't understand. Why does it matter if he likes me or not?"

Draco took a deep breath, which Harry figured was an attempt to inhale patience. And maybe it worked because when Draco spoke again, his voice was reasonably even, though there was a distinct edge of bitterness in it. "I don't want to talk about it here," he said, looking around at where they stood in the corridor with doors open into other patient's rooms on both sides. "Just come with me now, and I'll explain it later, back at the house."

Harry took his own deep breath of patience. He was sure he was going to hate this, but he found he couldn't say no. "Okay, fine," he said. "Where is he?"

"Just down there," said Draco, indicating a door near the end of the hall on the right. Draco walked ahead and went into the room first; Harry followed him reluctantly inside.

"Oh, Mr Malfoy," said a chirpy female voice. "You've got visitors. Look who's here!"

Harry looked over Draco's shoulder to see Lucius Malfoy dressed in a dark dressing-gown over pyjamas, his long pale hair plaited in a braid down his back, sitting at a small table with a Healer in lime-green robes. Lucius appeared to be busy writing, but it wasn't a quill he was holding. To Harry, it looked something like a Muggle crayon.

Lucius looked up at the Healer when she spoke, and Harry saw that the eerie, blank expression was still evident on Lucius's face. In an odd little child's voice, Lucius said, "Is my mummy?"

The Healer smiled, and spoke in a cheerful, warm voice as if to a small child. "No, Mr Malfoy, it's not your

mum. It's Draco. Can you say hello to Draco?"

"'Lo, Dwaco," said Lucius Malfoy, looking vacantly from the Healer to Draco.

It really, really was not funny, especially given how serious the overall situation was with Narcissa's condition still so uncertain, but for a second or two, it was all Harry could do to keep a straight face.

Draco slanted a warning glance at him over his shoulder. "Potter, if you laugh, I will kill you," he muttered under his breath. He turned back to the Healer and smiled. "Has he given you any trouble today, Healer McFarland?"

"Ah, no," she said. "He's been as good as gold, today, he has." She beckoned them in. "Come and see what he's done."

Draco walked over to the table, but Harry hung back. "Hello, Father," said Draco. "What's that you've got?"

Lucius held up the paper he'd been writing on, and Harry saw now that it was not writing. The man had been drawing a picture of stick people and grass and trees and a big yellow sun with rays poking out of it like spokes on a wheel. The sky was a blue stripe at the top of the page.

"That's very nice," said Draco, smiling at his father. "I like that picture."

"We went outside for a walk in the park today," said Healer McFarland, with a smile for Draco. She turned back to Lucius. "Do you want to hang your picture on the wall, Mr Malfoy?"

Lucius looked down and shook his head. Then he slowly held the picture he'd made out to Draco.

Draco took it. "Thank you, Father," he said, his voice unsteady. "I'll come back to visit you again

tomorrow, all right?"

Harry no longer found anything remotely funny about the situation. He watched, dismayed, as Lucius took a clean parchment from the stack on the table and began drawing a new picture, his green crayon filling in a spiky stripe along the bottom of the page. More grass.

Turning to the Healer, Draco spoke in a low voice. "You told me that Father might be taught to remember things from a different point of view," he said. "Would you explain that to Mr Potter? I think he could make a difference in how my father remembers the things that happened."

The Healer walked across to Harry and held out her hand. "Aye. It's lovely to meet you, Mr Potter," she said. "The thing is, memories are not just facts about the past. They're full of emotions and these emotions are frequently coloured by the beliefs we hold, beliefs that we have been taught, typically, from childhood.

"You see, an Obliviated person's memories are not actually erased. They have been disconnected from the conscious mind. With time and therapy, the memories can be reconnected and restored. But we've recently discovered that if a person's original childhood beliefs are not reinforced during the time when the memories are disconnected, and instead, new beliefs are taught, this changes the way the returning memories are experienced when they do reconnect. In other words, the reconnecting memories are emotionally malleable - they can be influenced by what we teach the person now in the present."

Harry ran one hand through his hair. He wasn't at all sure he understood what the Healer was saying. "It sounds like you can change bad memories into a good ones."

"Not exactly," said Healer McFarland. "It's a subtle thing, Mr Potter. We can't replace the memories themselves, but we can influence how the person feels about the memories, and what they believe about them. Usually, we try to have family members reinforce the person's original beliefs, but Draco has told me that certain beliefs his father held may be dangerous to himself and his mother, and he wishes to try to change those beliefs."

Harry frowned and looked at Draco, puzzled. "Okay," he said. "I'm not sure where I come in."

"I thought," said Draco, "that my father would be better off believing that we were... friends." His face was very pink now. "I can explain more when we're back at the house."

"Friends...?" Harry repeated, taken aback. He looked over at Lucius. The elder Malfoy was humming softly to himself, busily drawing a person with a red body. Already in the picture was a person with a blue body and one with a green body. Harry looked down at his own red shirt and then at Draco's blue jumper and the Healer's lime-green robes and felt his uneasiness twist into anger.

"Yeah, right," said Harry, looking back at Draco, ignoring the tense expression on Draco's face. "I can't wait to hear that explanation. Let's go home." He said a polite goodbye to the Healer and went to wait in the corridor for Draco. Draco spoke to the Healer for a few more moments, then came out. Harry held out his arm without a word, and Draco took hold of his wrist. Harry Apparated them both to Grimmauld Place.

As they walked in the front door, Harry, by habit, mentally steeled himself for the traps, but then... nothing happened. Draco's soft, "Oh!" beside him told him that Draco had done the same thing. Harry turned to find Draco looking at him with a small surprised grin, and he grinned back, the tension between them at the hospital momentarily forgotten. "The traps are gone," said Draco. "Your Weasel - er, Weasley friend broke the curses."

"Yeah, he did," said Harry. "It took him about two hours. Pretty interesting to watch, too." Harry walked further into the hall and turned around looking up. "Now I can do the repair work in here," he said, "and Kreacher can finally get it cleaned up." And suddenly, that's what he wanted to do right now. He wanted to fix things, not get into an argument with Draco over Lucius Malfoy. And, said the little wise voice in his head, maybe it would be good to take some time to think it over and not be angry when we talk. "I think I'd like to do work on the repair spells for a while before dinner," he told Draco. "We can talk about your father later, okay?"

For just a brief moment, Draco looked relieved. "That's fine," he said. "If you need any help, I'll be in the drawing room, reading." He took his stack of books and bolted up the stairs.

Harry drew his wand and was just about to cast a repair spell on a crack in the corner by the door, when

he heard Draco exclaim from upstairs. "Potter, you have an owl!"

Oh! Harry sprinted up the stairs to find Draco still standing in the doorway to the drawing room, and the little barn owl perched back on his stand in front of the windows. The owl twittered and bobbed at Harry. There was a note tied to his leg. Harry quickly crossed the room and removed the note. "Thank you!" he told the owl. He gave the owl a treat and scratched under his chin.

"That's a fairly nice owl, Potter," said Draco, who had followed Harry over to inspect the newcomer. "Not nearly so fine as an eagle, but the barns are acceptably reliable." He held out his hand as if to scratch the little owl, and the owl nipped his fingers. "Ow! Potter, you have to take him back. He bites!"

Harry who had already started reading the message, which was indeed a reply from Ollivander, chuckled. "I think you just insulted him, is all. He's been perfectly well-mannered with me."

"Yes, well, what's the little biter's name, then?" asked Draco, inspecting his fingers.

"Haven't decided," said Harry absently. Then he looked up at Draco. "I wrote to Ollivander this morning about your wand. This is his reply. Listen to this." And Harry read:

I remember our talk about the wands changing allegiance very well. And I am guessing now that your inquiry might concern one wand in particular, the hawthorn and unicorn hair wand that you won from Draco Malfoy, since I have also heard the rumours that you proclaimed yourself to be the Master of the Elder Wand when you duelled with the Dark Lord. Of course, you would not need to keep the hawthorn wand once you were in procession of the Elder Wand. I most certainly see your difficulty about not wanting to duel Mr Malfoy again to allow him to win it back, and thereby sacrifice the continued allegiance of the Elder Wand.

If you choose to return the hawthorn wand to Mr Malfoy without a duel, it would certainly work for him again, but perhaps not as easily as before. The only advice I can give you is what I have always said is the most basic fundamental principle of wandlore: the wand chooses the wizard. There is no way that I know of to magically force a wand to choose a particular master. But a wand may very well re-choose its original owner if given the opportunity, and a reason to do so.

Draco had sat down on the sofa during the reading. "What does he mean, it needs 'a reason' to choose me again?"

"I dunno," said Harry, but that wasn't the thing about the message that was troubling him the most. Until this moment, this was something that had not even occurred to him since he'd left the Elder Wand with Professor McGonagall, though he was kicking himself now for being an idiot that it hadn't. "Malfoy," he said, and there was urgency in his voice. "What do you know about the Elder Wand?"

"Not a lot," said Draco, "except that it's rumoured to be the most powerful wand ever made. There is even a story that it was a gift from Death itself."

"You know about that? About the Deathly Hallows?" Harry sank down in the armchair facing Draco. He'd understood from Mr Lovegood that not many wizards gave credence to the story of the Deathly Hallows. In fact, he was so surprised by Draco's reply, he was totally derailed from his original train of thought.

"I know there's a legend about them and Death," said Draco. "My Grandmother Malfoy read me that Babbitty Rabbitty rubbish when I was little." Draco paused for a moment, and his eyebrows lowered and he stared at Harry, obviously thinking furiously about something. Then he drew in a sharp breath. "Wait!" he said, in a hissed whisper. "You and your Invisibility Cloak! You have the Elder Wand and an Invisibility Cloak - aren't those supposed to be two of the Deathly Hallows?"

"Yes," said Harry. "And you're right. That Invisibility Cloak is the one from the story. I mean, I don't know about the gift from Death part... But my father was evidently a descendant of Ignotus Peverell, one of the Peverell brothers who were the supposed first owners of the Hallows. I inherited the Cloak from him."

Draco was still staring at Harry wide-eyed. "Bloody hell," he said. "So they do exist! I admit I was insanely jealous of you for having that Invisibility Cloak." He paused and frowned, thinking again. "Don't tell me you have the third one too, that Stone."

"No," said Harry. "I don't have it." And that was the truth. The Resurrection Stone was lying somewhere

among the dead leaves littering the floor of the Forbidden Forest.

"Hmm," said Draco. "That's a pity, because I was just thinking that if you did have all three, you would be the first person in known history to own all three at once. And I don't know, but I just had the crazy idea that it might explain why you're dreaming of people dying."

"What do you mean?" said Harry. "Why would that explain it?"

Draco shrugged. "It's rubbish, Potter. It was just a silly idea."

"No," said Harry, feeling that same sense of excitement he'd felt when he'd been on the cusp of understanding the Hallows after he'd visited Mr Lovegood with Ron and Hermione. "I want to know. What were you thinking?"

Draco hesitated, then nodded. "Okay, then. It's just this, that the legend of the Deathly Hallows says that if the Hallows are united under one owner, then that person would be the Master of Death." He paused. "Don't you see? If you were the Master of Death, it might explain why you've become the Meet 'n Greet Chap for the Door into Death."

Harry stared at Draco. "I... dunno," he said, thinking hard. "I thought..." And then Dumbledore's words from the Waiting Place came back to him. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and dropped his head into his hands. "Oh, bloody hell," he whispered.

"Oh, well, fine," said Draco. "You asked. I didn't think it was that stupid..."

"No, no," said Harry, sitting back up to face Draco. "It wasn't stupid. I think you might be right, or partly right." He took a deep breath, and let it out in a rush, making a decision right then to tell Malfoy everything. "When I was at the place where the dead wait myself, but I wasn't dead, Dumbledore and I talked about the Hallows. I already had the Invisibility Cloak, and Dumbledore had the Resurrection Stone and the Elder Wand. He left me the Resurrection Stone in his will, so then I had two of them. And when I won the Elder Wand from Voldemort, I guess that made me the owner of all three."

"Wait," protested Draco. He looked confused for a moment. "You just told me you didn't have that Stone."

"I don't have the Stone," said Harry. "I dropped it in the Forbidden Forest. But the point is, I lost it, I never gave it away. Maybe that means I'm still the true owner, even if I don't actually have it in my possession. I don't have the Elder Wand with me, either. I left that at Hogwarts, but there's no question that I'm still the true owner of that." He paused for a second, then went on. "But there's more. Dumbledore told me that I was the true Master of Death because I had not run away from Death, because I had accepted that I had to die. If that's true, then being the Master of Death has nothing to do with whether or not I have any or all of the Deathly Hallows."

"So we have two questions here," said Draco. "One, is it having the Hallows that makes you Master of Death or is it accepting that you had to die? And two, if you are Master of Death, what does that mean? Does it mean you can't die?"

"No. I don't think that's what it means, at all," said Harry. "I don't believe I can't die. Everyone has to die." He thought for a moment. "I think it's about fear. About mastering your fear and accepting death. That's all."

"Right," said Draco. "I get the mastering fear bit. But you could say that about mastering your fear of anything. If I was afraid of newts and I mastered that fear, then suddenly I'm the Master of Newts and I'm turning up in dream bogs every night? I'm not saying it's not true, or that it's not meaningful to have mastered the fear of death, but in the end, it's just words. It's just a lot of nice, philosophical rubbish. The Deathly Hallows are real and they're all yours, Potter. I think that's why you're dreaming of dead people."

"Maybe," said Harry, slowly. "But if that's true, what am I supposed to do? The Wand and the Stone are dangerous. I don't want them to fall into other hands and continue causing murder and insanity off into the future. And I don't want to keep them and be forced to dream of dead people for the rest of my life."

Draco smirked at him. "I could take that Invisibility Cloak off your hands..."

Harry snorted. "Oh, right. You're hilarious." He shook his head and glanced down at Ollivander's letter, and recalled his original train of thought from earlier. "But this isn't the thing that's worrying me the most," he said. "The reason I asked you about the Elder Wand in the first place is because I wondered if you knew its history. That it's changed hands down through hundreds of years and almost always by murder."

"Of course, I knew," said Draco. "Binns told us about it in History of Magic. It had several other names - like the Deathstick, or the Wand of Destiny."

"Right, and Ollivander says here that he heard rumours that I had proclaimed myself to be the Master of the Elder Wand when I duelled with the Dark Lord," said Harry with a groan. "He wasn't even there, but he knows this. Merlin, Malfoy, I stood up in the Great Hall in front of all those people, and there were lots of Death Eaters there too, and I announced that I was Master of the Elder Wand. I was so focussed on Voldemort, it didn't occur to me what a stupid thing that was to do."

Draco gave a soft snort. "Do you seriously think any of those people are going to try to duel you for the Elder Wand after seeing you defeat the Dark Lord?"

"I dunno, maybe not," said Harry, uncertainly. "But I think I would be stupid not to be concerned. If rumours are going around to people who weren't even there, it's like waving a red flag, isn't it? History lost track of the Elder Wand for a long time, and now anyone who is interested in it, knows where it is. I don't know who might decide to show up and try to kill me to get it. And the thing is, they don't even have to duel me with the Elder Wand. If they defeat me in a duel with my holly wand, it's the same."

"But if you keep the Elder Wand somewhere safe," said Draco, "they won't be able to get it, if they defeat you with your holly wand."

"Yeah, and that's not going to matter much to me if I'm dead! Besides, I don't want my holly wand to change allegiance to someone else..."

Draco gave him a scathing look. "Oh no, you don't want that, Mr Master of Death..."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Look, I'm sorry your wand thinks it belongs to me," he said. "But I'm not sorry I took it. I was desperate. And you have to admit I put it to good use." He grinned at Draco's still frowning face, realising that he could tell it was mostly a sham. "You'll just have to convince it to re-choose you, like Ollivander said."

Draco sighed and gave up trying to look angry. Now he just looked frustrated again. "Too bad Ollivander didn't mention how I might go about that," he muttered.

They'd come full circle in their argument, and were really no closer to having solved any of the issues Harry was concerned about. In fact, they might have even more questions now than when they'd started. But Harry felt again that quiet thrill he'd felt in the Gryffindor common room when he'd first realised he enjoyed talking to Malfoy and had wanted to talk to him more about wandlore. It was almost like having Hermione to talk things out with, but without Hermione's often excessively pragmatic, closed-minded viewpoint. He suddenly felt again, like he had in the common room, that there were so many things he wanted to talk to Malfoy about. And that, in itself, was very interesting.

"At least we know there's a possibility you can get the wand back without fighting me in a duel," said Harry. "So I'd say that's good news."

Kreacher popped into the room just then to announce dinner. Harry saw Draco glance longingly at his stack of books for a moment and realised that Draco hadn't had a chance to look at them at all since they'd come back from St Mungo's. And Harry hadn't done any of the restoration spells he'd intended to do, either. He could work on that after dinner, he thought, as he walked down to the kitchen, Draco trailing along behind him. And that was just as well, because it would put off their talk about Lucius, and Harry was not in any hurry to bring that up.

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Kreacher had cooked steak and roasted potatoes with gravy and peas for dinner. There was a lovely rhubarb crumble just out of the oven for later. Harry sat at the table across from Draco feeling amazingly content, in spite of the questions about the wands. He was starting to realise that he enjoyed Malfoy's

company now that they were not on opposite side of a life-and-death struggle. Malfoy had certainly made him laugh these last two days, both on purpose and unintentionally, and that had been a wonderful release after all the harrowing months of tense conflict he'd been through. And discussing things like wands with Malfoy was stimulating and interesting.

"Merwyn," said Draco, breaking into Harry's thoughts.

"What?" said Harry, having not the slightest idea what Malfoy was talking about.

"Merwyn," repeated Draco. "That's what you should name your new owl."

"Oh," said Harry, cutting his steak. Merwyn, he repeated to himself. It had a nice ring to it. In fact it had an oddly familiar ring to it that Harry couldn't immediately place. Merwyn. And then it hit him. "Wait a minute," he said. "There was a Merwyn on a Famous Wizards card. I remember because I had four or five of him when I was collecting them. Merwyn the Malicious. Medieval wizard who invented a lot of nasty curses and jinxes. Very funny, Malfoy. I'm not naming my owl after someone like that."

"I thought it would be perfectly fitting," said Draco holding up his finger for Harry to see. Harry could barely discern the tiny scratch on it from where the owl had bitten him.

"He's not much good at biting, if that's all the damage he did," said Harry with a chuckle. Then he had a sudden inspiration. "Maybe I should name him after people we want to remember. People who died in the war..." He paused. Draco was taking a bite of steak and looking at him expectantly. "Maybe something like... Albus Severus."

Draco choked on his steak. "You can't be serious," he said, when he'd finished coughing.

"Hey, that's an idea," said Harry, grinning. "Sirius."

"Oh, please," said Draco, with a groan. "But that's more like it, actually. The Blacks always named their

owls after ancient wizards, or stars or constellations."

"Not just their owls..." said Harry, pointedly.

"Shut up," said Draco. "My great-uncle Orion's owl was named after the ancient Norse wizard-"

"Thor," said Harry. "Yeah, Kreacher told me." He might consider a name like that. "So give me some suggestions, Malfoy," he said. "Serious ones. No more Merwyn the Malicious."

Draco glared at him for half a second and then rolled his eyes. "Okay," he said. "I was studying the tapestry upstairs and there are several constellation names that the family haven't used. I'm assuming you would want something new?" At Harry's nod of agreement, he continued. "All right, then, just off the top of my head, there's Aries, Hercules, Leo, Perseus, Scorpius..."

Harry snorted into his teacup. "I can't imagine naming an owl Scorpius," he said. "Some of the others, maybe... What else have you got?"

"Well, in my opinion, all the good star names have already been used, but there's Altair, or Rigil, or Aldebaran."

"No," said Harry, although Rigil wasn't terrible. "And the ancient wizards?"

Draco pulled a face. "The only ancient Norse wizard names I can think of are Odin and Loki. And if you didn't want to name your owl after Merwyn the Malicious, you don't want to name him after Loki either," he said. He paused for a second, thinking. "There's always the ancient Greek wizards." Then he snapped his fingers. "I think there was an old text book on Wizard Ancient History up in Regulus's room. I saw it when we were talking up there. That might give you some ideas."

"Thanks," said Harry. "I'll go look for it after dinner."

"Ready for your dessert, now, Master Harry?" croaked Kreacher, popping his head out of the boiler cupboard.

"Yes, thank you, Kreacher." And as Harry tucked into the delicious rhubarb crumble, that quiet feeling of contentment stole back over him. It was shocking to contemplate, but he wondered if he and Malfoy actually were becoming friends. He smiled to himself. Probably there was some Malfoy or Potter ancestor somewhere doing cartwheels in his grave...

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They split up after coming upstairs from dinner. Draco went into the drawing room to read his books and Harry went up to Regulus's room. Kreacher had been up during the day and put everything back in order. All the spilled drawers had been replaced, the scattered books returned to the shelf over the desk. Harry ran his finger down the line of books, reading titles, and found the one Draco had noticed. Legends of the Ancients - Demystifying the Facts and Myths of the First Wizards by Olympia Asgarden.

Harry pulled out the book and sat on the end of the bed to thumb through it. He found sections on the first wizards of the ancient Celtic, Norse, Roman, Greek, Japanese, Egyptian and Indian cultures. He turned quickly to the section on the Greek wizards, and the first name on the page grabbed his attention. Apollo. Apollo, Harry read, had been a wizard devoted to healing and music, to bringing order and harmony to civilization. His symbol was the sun, a circle with streaming rays of light. All of this resonated strongly with Harry and he smiled to himself. He didn't need to look any further. He'd found a name his new owl.

When he returned downstairs to the drawing room, he found Draco reading with his feet up on the sofa. "I've decided on a name," said Harry, when Draco looked up from his book. Harry stepped into the room and walked over to the owl on his perch by the window. The owl twittered at him and jumped to him when he held out his arm. Harry gave the owl a treat and then the owl walked up to his shoulder to butt his head against Harry's cheek. "See," he said to Draco, as he scratched the owl under the chin. "He has perfect manners."

Draco stuck out his tongue. "So what are you going to name him," he asked.

"Well," said Harry, "I think I need to ask him first if he likes it." Harry held his arm so that the owl walked back down to his forearm and faced him. Harry smiled at the intelligent heart-shaped face. The owl's bright black eyes watched Harry intently. "What do you think of the name Apollo?" he asked the owl.

With an excited twitter, the owl extended his wings and bobbed at Harry. "I think he likes it," said Harry. "Apollo it is, then, and Ollie for short."

"I'm still going to call him Merwyn," said Draco.

The owl let out a shrill, hoarse screech, and then lowered his head and hissed at Draco.

Draco sat up straight and his feet came off the couch. "Okay! I was only joking! Apollo is a wonderful name. Potter, keep that owl away from me!"

Harry laughed. He carried Ollie to the perch stand and let him step off his arm. "Go out and hunt and get some exercise," he told the owl. "You don't need to stay cooped up here in the house all the time."

With another bob and twitter, Ollie hopped to the windowsill and then took flight out the open window.

Ollie soared away, wings completely silent in the night air, and Harry watched until the owl had vanished in the darkness. He felt a gentle pang of sadness run through him, a fond remembrance of Hedwig. Then he turned back to Draco.

Draco was already absorbed back into his reading. Harry stood and watched him for a moment. Draco's face was rapt, his brows furrowed slightly with concentration. Harry grinned, fascinated by Draco's intense interest in these books. "Is that another book on Healing theories," he asked.

Draco continued reading for a moment, then looked up. "It's one of the text books from the First Year curriculum at the Derwent Academy of Healing Arts," he said. "Healer Pye lent me all his First Year books."

"Text books," said Harry, intrigued. "Do you think you might want to study this Healing stuff for real?"

"It's not stuff," said Draco, turning back to his book. "And yes, I think I would, except for one small detail." Harry heard that edge of bitterness creep back into Draco's voice again. "I don't have my N.E.W.T.S. and that's not likely to happen now, is it?"

"Oh," said Harry. "I dunno." It was a good question, and Harry had no answer for it. He had a very strong suspicion that Hermione was not going to accept not taking her N.E.W.T.S. He'd have to ask her what her plans were, once she got back from Australia. Maybe she could help Malfoy in some way. If she would help Malfoy...

And for the first time Harry thought about how his friends might react to having Malfoy here in Harry's house when they came back from their trip. If Malfoy was still here, that is...

"I'm going to go downstairs and work on repairing the entry hall," said Harry softly.

Draco didn't look up from his book. "Fine," he said absently, and went on reading.

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Harry worked diligently in the hallway for the rest of the evening. Kreacher helped with the cleaning and Harry did the restoration and repair spells. First, Harry fixed several cracks in the walls, then set to work using refurbishing spells to brighten the faded wallpaper, re-sticking the places where it was peeling, and restoring the original plush fullness to the worn carpet. The age-blackened picture frames were magically scrubbed back to gold and Kreacher cleared the cobwebs and grime from the serpentine chandelier and the glass globes of the old-fashioned oil lamps. Even the troll's leg umbrella stand got a cleaning, and

Kreacher carefully and lovingly dusted each of the stuffed and mounted elf heads on the wall.

When they were done, the hallway shone with polish and light, restored almost to its former elegance. It was barely recognizable as the same gloomy, dusty hall it had been that morning.

The only thing they did not touch was Mrs Black's portrait. Harry had worked quietly and carefully around her curtained frame, and noted again with interest, that she had not woken up to scream at him once since Draco had spoken to her. He wanted to consult Draco before he did anything else to her portrait.

But that would be another day, Harry decided. It was late. He thanked Kreacher and the old elf went off to his basement nest in the boiler cupboard. There was still a lot of work to be done to the house, but their work tonight had made a huge and noticeable difference in making the house feel like a home. Harry would no longer have to dread just walking in the door. It felt very satisfying to make these repairs and he suddenly felt a wave a gratitude to Malfoy for teaching him these spells, and for in a very real way, giving him the gift of truly owning this home. With a smile, Harry went up the stairs to tell him so.

The lamps in the drawing room were put out and Draco stood in the darkened room gazing out the windows. Ollie had not come back yet. Harry came into the room and went to stand next to Draco at the windows. It was a clear night, and the moon lit the room with a pale, sharp-edged light.

"Malfoy?" Harry spoke softly. "Why are you standing in here in the dark?"

Draco shrugged, then crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well, the hallway looks amazing, now," said Harry with quiet enthusiasm. "I just wanted to thank you for teaching me the spells."

"Didn't want my great-aunt's house falling to ruin, did I?" replied Draco, the bitterness in his tone discordant in the peaceful, moonlit room.

Harry took a step closer to look into Draco's face, saw the sadness in Draco's eyes. "What's wrong," he said.

"What isn't?" said Draco in a low, unsteady voice. He seemed to struggle then, on the brink of saying something else and Harry waited him out. Finally, Draco looked up and met Harry's eyes. "I can't go home, I can't go to school, and my parents are..." He trailed off, then started again. "My father may not be well for years, and my mother... my mother might never wake up..." He paused again for a long moment. "I have no idea what I'm going to do."

Harry didn't reply right away. There was a small part of him that still wanted to rub Malfoy's nose in the fact that he'd fucked up his life himself; that these events and consequences were what he deserved for siding with Voldemort instead of with Harry all those years. There was still a small part of him that was glad, and felt vindicated by the disasters that had befallen the Malfoys. But the larger part of him remembered the things Malfoy had told him these last few days; things Harry had understood and sympathized with. It might be crazy, and completely unexpected, but there was simply no getting around the fact that somehow Malfoy had become a person Harry cared about, and that he cared about hurting. Those small, gloating words were no longer an option.

"I'm not planning on chucking you out any time soon, Malfoy," said Harry finally, "so you're not homeless. And you don't know that you can't do your N.E.W.T.S. I think we can find out more about that." He hesitated, uncertain about the next part. "I don't know what to say about your parents. But you can't give up on them."

Draco tilted his head slightly and the sadness in his eyes melted into an unspoken hopeful question before he turned away to look out the window again.

"What was it you wanted to tell me about your father?" Harry asked. Lucius was not ever going to be a subject Harry wanted to discuss, but he was also no longer quite so unsettled or angry about it. "You said you thought I could help..."

Draco drew in a long breath and let it out in a sigh. "Yeah," he said. "But it's complicated."

"I got that, Malfoy," said Harry with a soft snort of a laugh. "The truth is, I didn't understand half of what that Healer tried to explain. I think my brain shut down when you said you wanted to tell your father we were friends. And what did the Healer mean when she said your father was dangerous?"

"My father isn't dangerous, Potter," said Draco flatly. "You saw him. He's like a two-year old child." He turned his head and fixed an intent gaze on Harry. "It's the things he believes - or did - before he was Obliviated that are a danger to me and Mother. If I have a choice, and it's possible, I don't want him to get his memories back and still have those same old beliefs."

That explanation finally made sense to Harry. "Okay, so you think I can help change his old beliefs," he said. That didn't sound so objectionable. "But I'm still confused. You said his beliefs are dangerous to you and your mum?"

"Yes," said Draco, then he turned away to look out the window again. When he spoke next, his voice was rough with emotion. "When I got back to the Manor that afternoon after talking to you in the Gryffindor Tower, I walked into a nightmare. All those hours I waited for you, my father spent screaming at my mother. When I got there, she had locked herself into their bedroom and he had nearly broken down the door."

"Merlin, Malfoy," breathed Harry, stunned. "I saw the three of you sitting together in the Great Hall after the duel. I didn't think he looked angry."

Draco shook his head. "I didn't realise it either. I think something snapped when they returned there alone. I'd never seen him like this. I..." He stopped for a moment and stared out the window. "I tried to stop him, but he was screaming that we were ruined, that I was a failure, and that it was Mother's fault that the Dark Lord died." Draco took a shaky breath. "He eventually stopped screaming, but I was furious with him because he refused to accept any blame for what's happened to us, for getting us involved with the Dark Lord in the first place.

"He never saw the Dark Lord as a monster," Draco went on after a moment. "He never wanted out. To the very end, he believed that everything would be fine if we could just do that one thing to redeem ourselves and get back into favour. He never saw that it was the Dark Lord himself that was the problem. He was completely obsessed by the idea of the Dark Lord's power and of us as his favourites, and he

never let go of that. Instead of realising that the nightmare was finally over, I think he went a bit mad when he found out Mother had helped you."

Draco turned to face Harry again, his eyes full of anguish. "He kept shouting that if he had a wand he would..." Draco stopped and Harry saw a shiver of revulsion go through him. "He was no better than those bastards that attacked us that night. I didn't dare let him know I'd got my wand back from you."

Harry couldn't think of anything to say. All these days, Malfoy had been carrying around this terrible memory, and not said anything. Harry was forced to see that while he, himself, still had some problems, such as what was happening with Ginny, his world was slowly but surely resolving back into normal. And would go forward. Malfoy's world had literally fallen apart.

"I think sometimes that I can never forgive him for the things he said," said Draco, his voice barely audible. "And then I see him at the hospital..."

Harry's heart turned over. So did his world. In that moment, everything shifted and changed, taking a suddenly different direction than he'd ever imagined. What happened next was the unconscious choice of an unguarded moment, a spontaneous action born from the heart. Harry reached out and smoothed the wayward fringe back from Draco's face with a tenderness in the unexpected gesture that was both sincere and startling.

Draco turned to look at him, his eyes full of cautious questions in the moonlight. "Don't," he breathed, a whisper of sound.

Harry heard no anger in the word, only the rawness of Draco's vulnerability, and his fear of revealing it. He let his hand drop away.

They stood close together in silence for a long moment. Harry felt drawn in. The quiet moonlit darkness embraced them with a sense of intimacy, a bonding connection weaving into the air between them in a way Harry had never felt before. His heart beat faster and without warning, the memory of holding Draco in his arms for that moment just before he'd Apparated them to St Mungo's the first time surged up within him. And like a spark to dry tinder, a sleeping ember of desire deep inside him flared and caught fire; he wanted to hold Draco again. And just as quickly, his surprised rejection of the possibility

put it out.

Draco stood so close, and Harry, coming back to himself, stepped away, and the precarious moment was gone. "I'll help you with your father," said Harry. "Just tell me what I need to do."

"Thank you," whispered Draco.

Harry moved past Draco and filled the bowl in Ollie's cage with treats. He turned back to find Draco watching him. Their eyes met and held in the darkness. Harry felt the connection again but it was an easier one; it felt as smooth as a river rock pulled at last from the grinding force of the current. Harry paused, unsure, then said his thought aloud. "You know, I've found myself wondering over the last few days," he said, "if we are somehow becoming friends."

"I don't know," said Draco, and Harry heard a teasing lightness in his tone that hadn't been there before. "I offered to be friends with you, right at the first, but I was soundly rebuffed. Since then, I've always thought you were an arrogant, attention-hungry, self-righteous prick."

Harry snorted. "As I recall, you wanted to tell me who my friends should be. There's a difference. And since then, I've always thought you were a snotty, scheming, spiteful, self-absorbed git." He smiled at Draco. "Dunno why we didn't get along before."

Draco gave him a small, wry grin back. "You do realise that if we are becoming friends, then somewhere the fabric of the universe is coming unravelled and the whole world is likely to fly apart at any moment."

"Yeah," said Harry, "that thought had occurred to me."

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The Waiting Place looked like a deserted harbour. Out of the shining white mist, beyond a single quay, rose rigging and masts and pearl-coloured sails. A tall ship. Harry gazed in awe for several moments before walking forward down the long narrow pier. Clear sea-green waves lapped at the pilings below Harry's bare feet. The mist rolled away before him as he approached, and at last he could see the whole ship with its sleek hull and towering masts. Light seemed to emanate from the surface of the deck, reflecting as sparkling lines of fire from the rigging and illuminating the sails. It was a majestic sight.

One old wizard sat at the end of the quay, his back to Harry, his feet hanging over the edge, trailing in the water. Harry walked down the pier to stand beside him at the very edge of the quay. The radiant ship lay alongside them. "Hello," said Harry, wondering who this was.

The elderly man looked up and beamed at Harry. He was wiry and tanned, had long grey hair and a longer grey beard, and his wizard's robes were hiked up to his knees so that he could splash his feet in the water. A pair of sturdy black boots sat beside him. "Ah, just the fellow I was waiting for," he said brightly.

"I am?" said Harry, taken by surprise. "But, how could you know I was coming?"

"Oh, I knew as soon as I saw that beauty there," he said nodding to the ship. "That was my dying wish, you see." He patted the space next to himself. "Have a seat, dear boy, and I'll tell you."

Harry sat down beside the old man, pulling up his own white robe to keep it dry. The water was cool and clear and felt refreshing on his bare feet. "It's a beautiful ship," Harry said, when he was settled.

"She is, indeed," said the old man, smiling at Harry. But first, I should introduce myself. My name is Captain Silas O. Summerby, and if I'm not mistaken, you, my dear boy, are Harry Potter. Am I correct?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry. "And you said you knew I was coming to meet you?"

"Well, you see, that ship there is the Alohomora. She was the fastest, sweetest ship I've ever captained, but sadly, she was lost in '78 in a sudden squall off the coast of New Zealand. The crew was saved, but she went down. It was my life's greatest wish to sail her again, and here she is." He paused, gazing

entranced at the shining ship for a moment. Then he turned back and smiled sadly at Harry. "And you, dear boy, are my life's greatest regret. It was only fitting that you both would be here to see me off."

"I don't understand, Captain Summerby," said Harry. "We've never met before. How could I be your life's greatest regret?"

"But, that's exactly it! I always meant to meet you, my boy, and tell you about your grandfather. When I heard you'd lost your parents when you were just a babe, I said to myself, Silas, you know that boy's history. You have to make the trip back to England and tell him. But I had a business and a family, and never did. So here I am, at the end of my life with that one regret."

Harry had sat straight up. "You knew my grandfather? Er... which one?"

"Your grandfather Will Potter. Your dad James's father. He was my best mate at Hogwarts. We met on the train and both of us were sorted into Gryffindor." He chuckled. "Oh, the scrapes we got into," he said, shaking his head. "I went to sea when I'd done my N.E.W.T.S. and travelled the world. I finally ended up in Australia, but Will and I corresponded over the years. It was quite a blow when he died." "So my grandfather's name was Will!" said Harry. "I never knew that much. Thank you, sir! I'd seen a name on a tapestry, a Charlus Potter, who married Dorea Black and had a son. I sometimes wondered if that might have been my grandfather."

"Charlus Potter was Will's younger brother. He was sorted into Slytherin, and when he married Dorea, also a Slytherin and a Black to boot, there was a parting of ways between the brothers. You see, there had always been animosity between the Blacks and the Potters. Then Charlus and his young son were killed in an accident, and I think Will felt terribly guilty. I know he took in one of your dad's friends later, one of the Black sons, who was outcast."

"Sirius," said Harry. "He was my godfather. He never told me any of this."

"Ah," said Silas. "It's likely he didn't know much of the story. I'm not sure Will ever talked about his brother after he died. He was too ashamed of having cut him off like he did, over things he realised too late didn't matter. I believe that adopting your godfather Sirius was his attempt to make amends."

Then Silas grinned at Harry. "But enough of this serious talk," he said with a wink. "Did you know your grandfather had an Invisibility Cloak?"

Harry grinned back. "Did he, now?"

"He did, and oh, you wouldn't believe the trouble we got into with it." He laughed again. "Once we sneaked into the cellar of Honeydukes during the middle of the night, and got so sick from gorging ourselves on sweets all night, that we had to miss class and spend the morning in the hospital wing. Will nearly missed the Quidditch match against Slytherin that afternoon. He was a top-notch Beater..."

Silas told Harry stories of his adventures with Will Potter at Hogwarts, and of the things Silas knew of James's childhood from Will's letters. Harry was enthralled. Time seemed to stand still, and when at last they stood together before the Alohomora, and it was time for Silas to board the shining ship, Harry felt as if only minutes had passed.

"I'm eighty-six years old," said Silas, finally, as he prepared to say goodbye. "Death, it seems, has been exceedingly kind, for it has granted my fondest wish, and resolved my greatest regret. I can't tell you how glad I am to have met you, Harry. And from all I've heard of you - I had a great-nephew at Hogwarts, you see - Will would have been exceedingly proud of his grandson."

"Thank you, sir," said Harry, deeply touched. "That means a lot to me. I've always wanted to know my family."

Then Silas boarded the ship and stood on the shining deck. The ship's glowing sails billowed out in some invisible wind and the ship moved forward, rising slowly out of the water as it slid away from the quay. It soared up and up into the distance, aloft and away, a vision of light that finally vanished into the mist.

Harry watched, heart-struck, until it disappeared, until everything dissolved into the shining white mist.

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Harry woke up slowly again, his mind still half in the dream, half gradually registering the nice, warm feeling that was so comforting... and then so startling, because there really shouldn't be someone all snuggled up against him, but there was. He grinned. This time he was not going to go back to sleep, so he lay still, and concentrated on remembering his incredibly, wonderful dream.

It was only a few moments later, that Harry heard a soft but sharp intake of breath and felt Draco stir beside him, felt him rise up as stealthily and silently as he could.

Harry opened his eyes and found himself looking right into Draco's horrified face.

"Oh, bloody hell," Draco groaned. "You're awake." He disentangled himself as quickly as possible and scooted away from Harry.

"Yes, I'm awake," said Harry, with a smirk. "What were you doing over here?"

"Nothing. Nothing. I don't realise I'm doing it! I get cold during the night and you're warm and you..." Draco stopped abruptly and his face went pink.

"And I what?" said Harry, intrigued.

"Nothing!" Draco looked like he'd rather kiss a Dementor than finish that sentence.

"Tell me or I'll order Kreacher to cook you that porridge again," said Harry, grinning.

Draco glared at him. "You feel... safe," he muttered. Then he looked at Harry with a suspicious gleam in

his eye, as if a new idea had just occurred to him. "Just how long were you awake, then, before I woke up?"

"Er..." It was Harry's turn to blush. "Not that long... I was thinking about the dream I had."

"But long enough to have shoved me off, if you'd wanted to." Draco looked at Harry speculatively. "So why didn't you?"

"I... er..." Harry cast around desperately for something to say other than you felt comforting. "I suppose you feel... safe... to me too," he said at last. At least he wasn't admitting anything that Draco hadn't already confessed to.

Draco's eyebrows got lost in his fringe and he stared at Harry as if not sure if Harry was taking the piss or not. Harry stared back and willed him not to ask anything else. "Right," said Draco, doubtfully, then seemed to think it was best to change the subject. "You said you were thinking about your dream? Was it dead people again?" He actually sounded interested.

"It was a friend of my grandfather's this time. A Captain Summerby," said Harry, and he told Draco his dream.

Draco was indeed interested, and seemed fascinated by the image Harry described of the shining tall ship rising into the sky. "Summerby," he mused, after Harry finished the story. "There was a Summerby played Seeker for Hufflepuff in Fifth Year. Wonder if they're related."

"He said he had a great-nephew at Hogwarts," said Harry. "That must be the one."

"Yeah. Bit of a sickly chap," said Draco. "Don't remember that he ever caught the Snitch."

And it was more than a little astonishing, Harry thought, after Draco had left to dress in his room across the hall, that it was Malfoy who he'd confided in the most about his dreams, that it was Malfoy who was

discussing wandlore and Hallows with him and helping him to sort things out. It was not Ginny or Hermione or Ron. And maybe the most astonishing thing of all was that talking to Malfoy was starting to feel quite natural.

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On the way down to breakfast, Harry stopped by the drawing room to check on Ollie. The little owl had returned and was sleeping in his cage, his head turned around and tucked into his back. Harry smiled and stood watching him for a moment, glad to have the presence of an owl again in his home. Draco came down the stairs a few seconds later, and they walked together down to the entrance hall.

There, Draco stopped in his tracks and slowly turned in place, nodding his approval. "Very good, Potter," he said. "I'm actually impressed."

Harry flashed him a quick grin, then turned to face Walburga Black's portrait. "You know, she hasn't woken up once since you talked to her," he said.

Draco moved to stand in front of the portrait. "I think she felt completely responsible, like she was the only one left who cared about the best interests of the house," he said. "I told her I'd take care of things, so she's not worried now. I don't think she really wanted to be screaming at people." Draco's expression turned pensive. "But of course, you should really do something more permanent. She doesn't deserve to be terrorised by the changes that are going to be inevitable, now that you've inherited the house, because she'll never understand or accept what's happened."

"Permanent? What do you mean?"

"I'm sure you've noticed that portraits react to spells very similarly to people. Haven't you used Stunning Spells on her?"

"Yeah, at times it was the only way to stop her screaming. But it wears off."

"Right. Well, you can use potions on them too," said Draco. "I had to put a portrait to sleep at the Manor. My great-great-great grandfather Archibald Malfoy was not pleased about the Dark Lord being in the house, and was excessively vocal about it. We had to do something before the Dark Lord heard him and destroyed the painting, or punished us. I painted him with a thin veneer of the Draught of Living Death. The potion, unlike a spell, does not wear off. It puts the portrait to sleep permanently until it is deliberately reversed with a Reviving Spell."

That was another thing Sirius obviously had not known, thought Harry, because if Sirius had known about this possibility, Harry had no doubt his godfather would have painted his mother's portrait to sleep ages ago. "Thanks, Malfoy," said Harry, sincerely. "It sounds like a good solution for me and for her," he went on, "but it'll have to wait. I... er, lost my Advanced Potion-Making text, and don't have any potions equipment or supplies any more."

"I have all of that back at the Manor," said Draco. "In fact, Professor Snape gave me extra supplies for the Draught of Living Death, just in case any of the other portraits decided to get too animated."

"I could send Kreacher to get them," said Harry.

"And the books on wandlore and dreams from the library," added Draco.

"Right," said Harry, grinning. "I'll send him now, while we eat breakfast. I'd really like to have the hall finished today."

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Before they started on the bacon and eggs and toast that Kreacher had cooked for breakfast, Harry explained what they wanted Kreacher to do. Draco gave the elf instructions on where to find his trunk of

potion equipment and supplies, and the types of books they were interested in.

They had barely finished eating when Kreacher reappeared with a crack. Next to him on the floor was a small trunk with a stack of book balanced on top. "I found these with no trouble, Master Harry," said Kreacher, "but Kreacher thinks something is not right at the Manor."

Before Harry could open his mouth to ask about that, the doorbell rang upstairs. He and Draco exchanged a look, then both of them hurried up to the entrance hall. Harry opened the door to find Minister Shacklebolt standing on his top step.

"Kingsley!" said Harry. "Come in."

"Harry," said Kingsley, with a wide smile. "I have some good news, for a change." Then he looked around the hall and his expression changed to surprise. "Oh, you've done wonders with this place, Harry. What a difference!"

"Thank you, sir." Harry grinned back. "Malfoy taught me the spells."

"Malfoy," said Kingsley, nodding at Draco, standing behind Harry. "Well done. How are your parents?"

Draco looked startled for a moment that the Minister was speaking to him, even asking after his parents, but then he drew himself up and put on his best sucking-up airs, as Harry thought of it, reminded now of how Malfoy had tried in vain to ingratiate himself with Slughorn. "They are not very well, Minister," replied Draco, seriously. "My mother has not regained consciousness, and my father is like a two-year old. They expect him to recover, but it may take a few years."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Malfoy," said Kingsley.

"Thank you, sir. And I wanted to assure you that I intend to honour any promises my father made concerning donations for reparations, particularly for repairs at Hogwarts." Draco paused, and he looked

entirely sincere. "I'd like to help with that personally, if I may. I know all the best architectural repair spells and I can teach them to others, as you can see." He gestured at the hallway that Harry had restored.

"That's very generous," said Kingsley. He nodded at Draco and Harry could tell that his opinion of Draco had just risen several notches. As had Harry's in fact. "There are repair crews being formed now. I will let them know you are interested."

"You can add me too, sir," said Harry. "Now that I know the spells, I'd also like to help."

"Excellent," said Kingsley, beaming at both of them. "Now, Harry, let me tell you the news." His large hand clapped down on Harry's shoulder. "I've just come from the Wizengamot. They have voted to award you the Order of Merlin, First Class, for your defeat of the Dark Lord Voldemort. I believe you are the youngest wizard ever to receive this honour. You'll get an official letter, of course, but I wanted to be the first to congratulate you."

"Oh!" said Harry, stunned. The possibility of this had never occurred to him. "I... er,... thank you, sir!"

"There will be a ceremony at the Ministry, but we are postponing that until Yaxley has been located and captured," said Kingsley. "We don't want to put you at risk." He gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze and then let him go. "I'll let you know..."

"Congratulations," said Draco a few minutes later, after Shacklebolt had left. Harry heard the traces of bitterness again in Malfoy's voice.

Harry shrugged. "You know I don't really care about that medal, don't you?"

Draco glared at him. "I suspected as much," he said. "And that only makes it worse."

"Oh, there's just no pleasing you, is there?" Harry laughed. "Let's go make this potion and paint your

Auntie Burga to sleep."

"Fine," grumbled Draco.

They clattered back downstairs and set out all of Draco's potion equipment on the kitchen table. They found more than adequate supplies of everything they needed. Draco had even kept the paintbrush he'd used on the portrait at the Manor. It took about an hour, but they succeeded in brewing a first-rate batch of the Draught of Living Death. Harry remembered to use the side of the knife to crush the Sopophorous Bean, and to add a clockwise stir after every seventh counter-clockwise stir until the liquid paled from darkest purple to clear-as-water.

Auntie Burga, however, was not amused by the idea of being painted to sleep. She let out such a screech when she realised what Harry and Draco were up to, with their pot of "cleaning fluid," that Harry had to Stun her again. Her face froze in the most hideous, contorted expression imaginable. "Bloody hell," said Harry, very much not amused himself at this point. I don't want her to look like that all the time! Don't you know any kind of cheering-up spell we can do?"

Draco sniffed. "Cheering-up spell? Really, Potter. Me?" Then he looked at Harry with a scheming grin. "I may have a cunning plan, however..."

Harry couldn't help but grin back. "I'm all ears," he said. "Let's hear it."

A few minutes later, Harry was hiding inside the doorway of the dining room, out of sight from the portrait's point of view, his wand drawn and ready. Draco stood just to the side of Auntie Burga's portrait, placed precisely so that Harry had a clear shot at the painting from the dining room door. Draco also had his wand drawn, and with his left hand, was holding the pot of potion and paintbrush behind his back.

"Ready?" asked Draco.

"Ready," affirmed Harry. "You sure you don't want me to cast the Reviving Spell?"

"I'll try it first," said Draco. "I need to use my wand more...if I'm ever going to convince it to re-choose me somehow... and it will look better coming from me."

"Okay," said Harry. "Whenever you're ready..."

Draco took a deep breath and then adopted a sorrowful, contrite expression. He pointed his wand at the portrait. "Rennervate!"

A second later, the screeching resumed full-force. Draco's spell had worked.

"Auntie Burga! Auntie Burga! I'm sorry!" yelled Draco. "I'M SORRY!"

To Harry, who was stuck hiding uncomfortably inside the dining room doorway, it seemed like ages, but it was probably more like ten minutes, before Draco was able to calm his great-aunt's portrait down. At last, after many excuses and explanations, most of which involved casting Harry as a manipulative bully who had forced an unsuspecting, innocent Draco to help him against Draco's will, the portrait stopped sobbing and wailing obscenities. Harry rolled his eyes, gritted his teeth, and reminded himself that if this worked, he would never have to deal with Walburga Black ever again.

Finally, finally, the portrait's voice calmed, and that cooing tone crept back in. Harry had to give Malfoy credit. He may have laid it on a bit thick, but he'd achieved the desired result.

Harry dared to look, barely peeking out of the doorway, to see how the portrait appeared now. He had his wand poised...

"Oh, my dear Drackykins," the portrait was saying. "You can't let that terrible half-blood filth treat you like this. You're a Black! You..."

"Auntie!" said Draco, hastily cutting her off. "Would you please tell me about how you discovered my cousin Regulus's magic? Wasn't he just a baby?"

"Oh, he was, he was!" she said. "Just a wee babe! Such a dear, magical boy, he was." And she clasped her hands over her heart and looked out over the hallway lost in memory, the most beatific expression on her face that Harry had ever seen.

Harry was so amazed by it, he almost forgot what he was supposed to do. But then Draco turned his head, his eyes wide and frantic, and whispered, "NOW, you idiot!"

Harry aimed his wand at the portrait and thought, Stupefy! as hard as he could. There was a flash of red light, then just the tiniest little hiccup of a squeak when the spell hit, and Walburga Black was Stunned, frozen in place, her facial expression caught in what may have been the happiest moment of her life.

"It worked!" yelled Harry at Draco. "Paint! PAINT!"

When it was done, Draco gazed at up pensively at his great-aunt's immobile portrait. "This really was a despicable trick," he said. Then he grinned conspiratorially at Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning back. "It was perfect."

There was plenty of the potion left, so Harry found a bottle down in the kitchen for it, and they sealed it up to save in case any of the other portraits in the hallway decided to act up. As it was, they seemed to think it was best to pretend to sleep and stay that way.

After lunch, Harry took Draco to St Mungo's. He kept his promise and went with Draco to visit Lucius. He'd always envied his cousin Dudley's stacks of colouring books and boxes of brightly coloured crayons that he'd never been allowed to play with. Of course, that had been when he was four or five years old. So it was with a mixture of embarrassment and surprise that he found himself actually enjoying sitting at the table with Lucius Malfoy drawing pictures. Harry drew a picture of himself flying on a Hippogriff. It was crude and a bit stick-like, but Harry was quite pleased with the result. "Hippogriff," he said to Lucius,

enunciating carefully.

"Ippagriffffff," said Lucius. He still looked vacant, but he seemed to like Harry's picture.

Draco was putting the finishing touches on a crayon masterpiece depicting a castle and a lake with trees and a sunset over the water. He'd obviously had a lot more practice at this drawing and colouring stuff than Harry, and Harry was grudgingly impressed. But at Harry's verbal exchange with Lucius, Draco looked up and saw what Harry had drawn. "Oh, you would bring that up," said Draco in a low, aggrieved voice.

"What?" said Harry, taken aback by Draco's tone. "Bring what up?"

"You don't remember?" said Draco. He sounded cross and rather incredulous. "You don't remember what happened with that bloody Hippogriff in Care of Magical Creatures class?"

"I remember riding it," said Harry, feeling defensive. "It was bloody brilliant. I remember that!" A split second later, he remembered the rest. "Oooh," he said, heatedly. "You mean the time Hagrid had to carry you to the hospital wing, and then you went around for months in bandages and a fake sling so that Parkinson would feel sorry for you, and so you could get Hagrid sacked?"

Draco glared at him. "It wasn't months!"

Harry glared back. "You git!" he retorted, angry now himself. "You had Snape force me and Ron to cut up Potions ingredients for you for weeks. I can't imagine why you were so keen on having me remember that!"

A small distressed squeak made them both look up. Lucius was staring at them, his lower lip trembling, tears swimming in his vacant grey eyes.

Oh, Merlin! Harry glanced over at Draco out of the corner of his eye.

Draco's eyebrows had disappeared up under his fringe and he looked dismayed and horrified. "Do something!" he whispered furiously to Harry.

"ME?" Harry whispered furiously back. "He's your dad!"

Two tears rolled down Lucius's face. Draco jumped up and came around the table and put his arms around his father to hug him. "We're sorry, we're sorry," he said in a rush. "It's okay. Don't cry. Please, don't cry!" He gave Harry a desperate, imploring look. "Potter is sorry too, aren't you Potter?"

"I'm sorry, yes," said Harry, his anger forgotten at the appalling sight before him. "I'm very sorry."

"There!" said Draco with mock brightness. He patted his father's back awkwardly. "It's okay, now, see? Everything is fine!"

Lucius looked up at Draco and sniffled loudly. "Git?" said Lucius in his childlike voice.

Harry got up very quickly and left the room. He managed to walk about halfway down the corridor before he slumped against the wall and sank to the floor, put his head down on his knees, and as quietly as possible, died laughing. It was a good five minutes before he had the strength to get up and head for the waiting room. He was still wiping away tears of mirth and chuckling to himself when he passed Narcissa Malfoy's room.

The sight of Draco's mother lying still and unconscious, her face nearly as white as the pillowcase below her head, sobered him instantly. He stood for several moments in her doorway wishing fervently for Draco's sake that she would be all right. Then he went out to the waiting room and sat on the tattered sofa, glad that no one else was in the room just then.

Draco came out of the ward a short while later. "He's taking a nap, now," he said, shoving the Hippogriff

picture at Harry's face. "You were not helping in there."

Harry stood up and took his picture. "I thought it was going well, Malfoy, until you got all shirty with me over my drawing," said Harry mildly. "I really didn't mean anything by it, you know."

Draco looked petulant for another half-second, then gave it up. "I wanted to ride it too," he said, very quietly. "It wasn't fair that only you got to ride it."

"Seems to me that you could have ridden it, if you hadn't tried to be such a big shot and insulted it first. You did almost the same thing with Ollie yesterday. Most things don't take kindly to insults, you know," said Harry firmly, but also very quietly, suddenly very conscious that there were patients' rooms just on the other side of the door. "And don't talk to me about fair. I had a lot of unfair stuff thrown at me too," he went on. "Serious stuff. Like a Dark Wizard trying to kill me nearly every minute." He waved the picture he'd drawn. "This was one of the few times I actually had a happy memory."

Draco stood for a moment, staring hard at Harry, considering all he'd said. "I'm never going to be able to top that "the Dark Wizard was trying to kill me my whole life" thing, am I?"

"Probably not," said Harry, with a small smile. "But the bit where Nagini ate your owl, that was a good one. That was close."

"I liked that owl," said Draco mournfully. He returned Harry's smile with a wry smile of his own, then sighed. "I don't want that to happen with Father again," he said, and this time he was both serious and sincere.

"I agree," said Harry, equally serious. He took a deep breath and looked up to meet Draco's solemn, light grey eyes. "We need to talk. I can't pretend to be your friend, Malfoy."

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When they got back from St Mungo's, Draco went straight up to the drawing room to study his Healer textbooks. Harry came up a moment later, to check on Ollie. The little owl twittered and bobbed on his perch when he saw Harry. With a smile, Harry gave him a treat and stroked him, speaking softly to him for a few moments. Harry glanced at Draco, but Draco already appeared engrossed in the book he was reading.

They had not spoken at all since Harry's last words at the hospital. Draco's reaction had puzzled Harry, and he still wasn't sure what expression he'd seen flit across Draco face. Harry had simply held out his arm, Draco had taken hold of his wrist, and Harry had Apparated them back home. Now Draco seemed determined to ignore him. Harry gave Ollie a last scratch under the chin, then headed back down to the ground floor to continue the restoration of the house.

He started with the dining room. Harry was becoming very fluent with the spells, so it didn't take long before that room, like the entrance hall, was restored to its former elegance. Then Harry went down to the kitchen. Although Kreacher had worked wonders down there last summer, and it was still clean and shining, Harry could now sense the cracks in the foundation of the house, the loose stones in the chimney, the crumbling mortar in the flagstone floor. All of these things he repaired, and it was with great satisfaction that he surveyed the room when he was finished. It not only looked bright and shining now, it felt whole to him.

Kreacher came out of his boiler cupboard to watch, his great grey eyes filled with approval and adoration. But Harry noticed that every few minutes the elf's ears drooped and he looked worried instead.

"What is it Kreacher?" asked Harry. "Am I doing something wrong?"

"Oh, no, Master Harry," croaked Kreacher. "Kreacher is glad to have the kitchen repaired at last. Kreacher is worried about Miss Cissy. She is not going back home yet, is she?" he asked, wringing his hands.

"Miss Cissy is still in hospital," said Harry, chagrined that he'd forgotten to tell Kreacher what was going on. "We don't know when she'll be well enough to go home." Then Harry remembered Kreacher's comment earlier that morning when he'd returned from the Manor with Malfoy's Potion equipment. "You said you felt something at the Manor," asked Harry. "I meant to ask you about that this morning.

What was it?"

"Kreacher is not knowing, Master Harry," said Kreacher. "But something is not right there. Kreacher felt a presence or a spell that was hidden and not meant to be felt by a wizard. It was something that should not be in the house."

Harry frowned. "Do you think someone is there that shouldn't be?" he asked. "Like someone under a Disillusionment Charm?"

Kreacher shook his head. "Kreacher is not sure, but Master Harry can't let Miss Cissy or Mr Draco go back there," he said. "Kreacher is only sure that it is something not right."

"All right, Kreacher," said Harry. "I'll go tell the Aurors and have them check. We'll be sure it's safe before Miss Cissy goes home."

The old elf seemed to be satisfied with this. "If there is danger, Master Harry," he said, "Kreacher is ready with his sword." He gave Harry a low bow and then set about preparing dinner.

Harry went immediately upstairs, stuck his head out the front door, and signalled one of the Aurors on duty. After he explained Kreacher's concerns to the Auror and was assured the message would be relayed to Minister Shacklebolt, Harry went up to the drawing room to tell Draco. Draco listened with a growing frown and went back to reading his book without a word.

However, the entire time Harry was telling Kreacher's story to Draco, Ollie was swooping in and out of the window, stopping on his perch to bob and twitter at Harry, then flying in and out again. Harry finally got the message. Ollie wanted to take a letter somewhere. Giving in, Harry sat at the writing desk, and wrote a short note to the Weasleys. He introduced Ollie, told them about restoring the house and about visiting Teddy. He promised to invite them over once the repair work was done, though he felt slightly guilty about that. He had no idea how long he would be keeping Malfoy's presence in the house a secret. Until Ron and Hermione get back from Australia, supplied the helpful little voice in his head. So Harry asked if they had heard from Ron and Hermione. At least maybe he would get some advance warning. With that, he'd run out of things to write about, so he sent Ollie off with the note.

Dinner that night was a quiet affair. Kreacher had cooked a fresh steak and kidney pie, and they had ice cream with chocolate syrup for dessert. Harry thought Draco was doing a very good imitation of a condemned man having his last meal.

"We need to talk," said Harry finally. "I think there are things we need to say to each other."

Draco set down his spoon, but he didn't look up. "You've said enough already," he said. His voice was tight and Harry heard the bitterness again. "It's fine if you've changed your mind, Potter. I won't ask you to help with Father again. There's nothing else we need to say."

Harry stared across the table at Draco for a long, stunned minute. "What do you mean it's fine if I've changed my mind? I have not changed my mind," he said, exasperated. "As much as I would normally loathe the idea of helping your father, I agree that it would be better if I do."

Draco looked up at that, and Harry saw again the expression that had flitted across Draco face in the waiting room at St Mungo's, and he finally knew what it was: hurt and disappointment. What the hell...? It was that damned kicked puppy face again. Harry was beginning to think Malfoy knew exactly what he was doing with that face.

"You said you can't pretend to be my friend," said Draco, and the hurt expression contained confusion now too. "That's what we agreed to try. So you have changed your mind."

"No, that's not what I meant," said Harry, suddenly making sense of everything. "I meant," he said pointedly, "that if this is going to work, we need to talk about our past and put it behind us. I said I can't pretend to be your friend. I meant it has to be real." Harry paused. "I actually like talking to you when we're not fighting, but then something from the past comes up and one of us misunderstands the other and everything goes wrong so fast. This right now is a perfect example." He paused again. Draco's face had gone pink and he was staring into his bowl of melted ice cream. "I know you think the universe will explode at any moment, but do you think we could talk, that we could try?" said Harry in a gentler, hopeful voice. "I'm tired of fighting with you..."

Draco was silent for a very long moment. At last, he looked up and studied Harry's face, his gaze questioning and thoughtful. "Yes," he said, finally. "I'm tired of it as well." Then he gave Harry a small, hesitant grin. "But if the universe does explode, it will be your fault."

"Oh, right," said Harry with a laugh. "Blame it on me."

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They agreed to talk later that night, after they went to bed.

Draco went back to the drawing room after dinner to study. Harry was working on restoring the plumbing in the first floor bathroom when Draco called out down the hall to say that Harry had an owl. It was a Ministry owl with a note and a parcel for Harry from Kingsley. Malfoy Manor, said Kingsley, had been searched again but the Aurors had found nothing that seemed unusual or dangerous.

The parcel contained two books. One was a copy of The Auror Handbook: Year I Training Manual and the other was Advanced Spells for Conflict Situations: Offensive and Defensive Spells for Law Enforcement Officers. Plumbing forgotten, Harry sat down in the armchair with an excited grin and opened the Advanced Spells book to Chapter One: Capturing Criminals with Ease and Finesse.

The most critical element in any encounter with a criminal, he read, is to prevent escape. It is the law enforcement officer's first priority. Unless there is a life-threatening situation, the Anti-Disapparation Jinx should always be the first spell cast.

Harry had never learned this spell in his Defence Against the Dark Arts classes and he felt a small thrill go through him. He was going to love this book. He looked up to see Draco watching him with curiosity. "Too bad you can't Apparate," he said, grinning. "There's a spell in here I'd like to practice."

Harry read for a few more minutes, and then Ollie returned with a note from Molly. Ron and Hermione, she said, were staying in Australia another week, so Harry was given a short reprieve from telling the

Weasleys about his secret visitor. After giving Ollie a treat, Harry reluctantly went back to his work on the plumbing. He wanted to finish all of the restoration work before Hermione and Ron returned. He glanced at Draco as he was leaving the drawing room, and saw that Draco was now reading the Auror Handbook, a surprising look of avid interest on his face.

The restoration of the bathroom took some time. There were rusty pipes and areas of water damage under the marble floor, cracks in the walls and the ceiling, and peeling wallpaper. When Harry finally finished and came out into the hall, he stopped still for a moment, sure that he'd heard Draco talking. Feeling a little foolish, he tiptoed down the hall to the drawing room door, listening. Then he had to grin. Draco was talking to Ollie. In fact, Harry realised, Draco was apologising to Ollie for insulting him. He heard Ollie twitter and knew that the apology had been accepted.

With a wide smile, Harry tiptoed back to the bathroom, then turned around and walked down the hall normally. By the time he reached the drawing room, Draco was on the sofa reading as if he'd never moved.

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When they were ready for bed, they met in Harry's room. They sat on the bed facing each other; Draco sat at the foot and Harry at the head. Harry had put on a T-shirt, though he normally slept without one. He simply couldn't imagine sitting in nothing but his boxers talking to Malfoy. Draco, however, was wearing only his pyjama trousers, as usual.

The gas lamps were off, but Harry lit one candle on his desk, so that they were not in complete darkness. Moonlight flooded the room also, from the high windows on either side of the bed. The canopy overhead created the feeling of a secure, private space for them to talk.

"Maybe we should start by years, from the beginning," said Harry. "You know, work up to the big stuff slowly."

"Fine," said Draco, barely above a whisper. He was staring at his hands in his lap.

"Okay, then," said Harry. "Do you want to start?" He studied Draco curiously, waiting for an answer. Draco's head was down, his long fringe falling forward to hide his eyes. He was sitting so still, that with his light hair and pale skin, he looked to Harry like a marble statue in the flickering candlelight and cool moonlight of the room. It was almost odd when he moved finally, lifting his head and shaking back the hair from his eyes.

"First Year..." prompted Harry softly. "Anything you're still angry about...?"

Draco looked away from him, then back down at his hands. He seemed to be struggling with what he wanted to say, and Harry waited, wondering what in the world in First Year had been so terrible that Malfoy couldn't talk about it.

At last, Draco sighed and looked back up. "There isn't any way I can say this, without sounding childish," he said quietly, "but you didn't like me." He paused for a moment. "I wanted to be your friend and you turned me down. It hurt. Quite a lot, actually."

Draco's words hung in the air for a long moment while Harry tried to wrap his mind around this unexpected confession. He had truly never imagined that Malfoy had cared about being friends with him. His memory of the event was also tainted by the fact that Malfoy had reminded him almost instantly of his despicable cousin Dudley.

And then Harry realised something even more startling. Instead of beginning with the small things and working their way up, he had the sudden sneaking suspicion that maybe they had started with the biggest thing of all. He could almost see how this one thing might be at the root of most of their problems, at least the early ones.

"I honestly had no idea of that," said Harry, frowning. "But is this what it's been about all along? Our fighting? That I didn't like you?"

Draco's expression hardened and he shrugged. "Maybe."

Harry paused. "I'm not sure I understand why it would have mattered to you so much. We didn't know each other at all."

"You didn't know me, but I knew you, Potter," said Draco. "Everyone knew you. And I know now that you had no idea that you were famous, but I grew up hearing about you and imagining that you would be my friend. It was a stupid childhood fantasy, I know, but I believed it. It never occurred to me that it might not happen." He paused and looked back down. "I was... to be honest... pretty crushed. And embarrassed."

Harry stared at Draco for a long moment, taking all of that in. "Yeah," he said, finally. "I can see that." He thought for a moment about how Draco had acted at Madam Malkin's and in the train compartment and he knew he couldn't have responded any differently. "Well," said Harry, "you should know that a lot of the reason I didn't like you when we first met was that you reminded me of my Muggle cousin. He was a spoiled-rotten bully and I hated him back then."

"I don't see how that's supposed to help me feel better about it, at all," said Draco sullenly.

"Right," said Harry. "I suppose not." He paused, thinking. "I only meant that maybe I was wrong to carry on believing something just because I thought it was true when I was eleven years old." He looked up and met Draco's eyes. "Do you think maybe we could start over?" he asked softly. "Because when we're not fighting, I..." He felt his face heat up and was very glad for the darkened room. "I think I do want to be your friend now."

Even in the dim light, Harry could tell that Draco's face had also gone pink. Draco looked down, but Harry saw that there was a new pleased expression on his face. Harry held out his hand. "I'm Harry Potter," he said quietly. "I'm sorry about crushing your fantasy. I didn't know."

Draco looked up with a crooked half-smile. He hesitated a second, then shook Harry's hand. "I'm Malfoy," he said. "Draco Malfoy. Apology accepted."

"Do you think things would have been different... if I'd taken your hand that first time?" Harry asked. He

was very curious about how Draco might see this, because he didn't believe it would have changed anything much. Draco's values and his family's alliance with the Dark Lord would have come between them sooner or later. Probably sooner.

"I don't know," said Draco. "It's doubtful." He let out a deep breath. "You wouldn't have changed, and I couldn't see how insane my father was or how vile the Dark Lord was until last year."

Harry nodded. "Yeah," he said. They sat in silence for a moment, then Harry asked, "Is there anything else?" He grinned a little at Malfoy's shrug. "Maybe you should just give me a list of all the things that made you angry with me."

Draco gave a soft snort. "It's a very long list, Potter," he said, but Harry heard a hint of teasing in his tone. "I hardly know where to begin..." He tilted his head back and stared at the canopy over their heads for a moment. "There was all that unfairness about you getting on the Quidditch team in First Year and having a broom. Then there was that dragon business and I got detention for trying to report you and was dragged out into the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the night. I was scarred by that, Potter. Scarred. And then somehow you caused Slytherin to lose the House Cup." He paused. "That's just First Year. Shall I go on?"

"No," said Harry. "Don't." He sighed. They might be here all night. "Look, let's just acknowledge that a lot of stuff happened on both sides and let it go at that. And let's focus on the really important ones, okay?"

"There was the time you and your friends jinxed me and Crabbe and Goyle and left us on the train in the luggage compartment. It took us weeks to get over that."

Harry snorted a laugh. "I'm not sorry for that," he said.

Draco flashed him a grin. "I got you back a little, though. How's that nose?"

"My nose is fine, thanks," said Harry, returning Draco's grin. "Anything else?"

Draco's face slowly sobered. He looked away, his expression turning serious and distressed, and Harry knew that the teasing was over. Whatever Draco was about to say, it was something that mattered very much. The air between them seemed to go thick with unspoken emotion and it was several moments before Draco spoke.

At last, Draco's hand came up to touch a point on his chest near his left shoulder. "There's this," he said, his voice rough and hushed, and then his fingers traced a diagonal line across his body to a point near his right hip.

Harry felt a prickle of horror run through him like an icy finger trailing up his spine. This! Oh, Merlin. This. He should have remembered, should have anticipated this. He bent forward, squinting in the dim light, and then scooted closer to Draco to look. And there it was. A scar. A thin silvery line that ran across Draco's torso from his left shoulder down to disappear under the waistband of his pyjama trousers. Harry drew in a sharp gasp of breath when he saw it.

"I hated you for this," said Draco, his voice still quiet, but now full of resentment. "Not because you did it. I know I cast the first curse. And I intended to hurt you for seeing me cry." He paused for a moment, frowning. "I hated you for acting like it never happened. You sliced me open and it didn't matter to you at all."

While Draco was talking, his eyes still downcast, Harry had searched Draco's face. Maybe it was that the room was dark, but Harry could see no trace of a similar scar on his face. He took a deep breath when Draco finished talking. "It did matter to me," said Harry. "It mattered a lot. There are only a few times in my life that I've been absolutely terrified, and that was one of them." He reached out, for they were sitting close to each other now, and touched Draco's wrist. Draco looked up at him then. "I didn't know what that spell did," explained Harry. "I never would have done that to you on purpose."

"You never told me that. You never said a word," said Draco.

"I... It wasn't as if we were on easy speaking terms, Malfoy," said Harry softly. "And you were fine. You were back in the Great Hall the next day..." And suddenly Harry understood something he had not taken into account before. That while the damage to Draco's body may have been repaired, the hurt Harry had caused had gone much deeper than that. A lump rose in his throat, and he had to swallow hard before

he could speak again. "I regretted casting that spell on you more than anything I've ever done," said Harry earnestly. "It was a terrible mistake. I'm sorry."

Draco was watching him intently, and Harry met his eyes staunchly, hoping Draco would believe he was sincere. Draco nodded after a few seconds, his eyes glittering in the candlelight. "Okay," he whispered. He was quiet for a long moment, and then a slow smile appeared on his face. "It had its compensations, though," he said, and his tone was lighter, slightly teasing again. At Harry's questioning look, he went on. "It's a Harry Potter scar," he said. "Know anyone else who's got one? Everyone wanted to see it. I was getting a Sickle for a peek, a Galleon to touch it. I made twenty-two Galleons and thirteen Sickles the day I got out of the hospital wing."

Harry's jaw dropped. For a moment, he was appalled. "You're joking," he said, aghast.

"Yes, you idiot," said Draco. But there was a fondness in his voice that Harry had never heard before. "So now you're not the only one with a curse scar."

"Ha!" said Harry, unspeakably relieved. "But I have more than one." He held out his hand where the words, I must not tell lies, were etched in faint white lines. "And then there's this," he said, pointing to the place on his chest, just below his collarbones, where the Horcrux of Slytherin's locket had burned him. "And this," he said, turning his arm over to show two small puncture marks. "That's where Nagini bit me," he said. "I might have had more, except Fawkes healed a couple of things."

Draco bent over Harry's arm trying to make out the small marks in the dim light. "I want to hear that story some day," he said, when he straightened up. "But look at this. I only noticed this myself a couple of days ago." He held out his left arm with his hand turned palm up. "See anything?" he asked.

Harry looked hard, but there was nothing there. "No."

Draco leaned off the bed so that his arm stuck out into the shaft of moonlight shining through the window. "Now look," he said.

"Oh!" Harry breathed. There was the Dark Mark on Draco's arm. But where before it had been black,

now it glowed white. "I thought it was gone!" said Harry.

"Yeah, me too," said Draco, pulling his arm back out of the moonlight. "It doesn't show up at all during the day."

"Wow," said Harry. "I guess that beats my snake bite."

Draco stared at him for half a heartbeat and then he laughed. It was one of the few times Harry had ever heard him laugh genuinely, and Harry thought he liked the sound of it very much.

"We each have a little souvenir from the Dark Lord, then, don't we?" said Draco.

"Yeah, if you want to call it that," said Harry.

"At least I have the good taste not to wear mine around on my forehead."

Harry snorted. "Oh, very funny," he said, and it actually was. Draco grinned at him and he grinned back. It was surprising how much lighter things felt between them. "Is there anything else we need to talk about?" asked Harry.

"No," said Draco. He was quiet for a moment. "So much of it seems so... insignificant now."

Harry nodded. "That's what I was thinking, too," he said. "After last year, hiding and fighting Voldemort, I can't even remember much of it."

They moved then to get into bed. Harry put out the candle on the desk with a wave of his wand. The moonlight washed the room with a gentle light, and Harry felt a sense of peace he'd rarely felt before.

"Do I still remind you of that Muggle cousin?" Draco asked in a hushed voice.

Harry thought about that. "Not so much," he said. "He's really fat and not very smart. Not like you at all."

He heard Draco's soft laugh in the darkness and he smiled and turned over. He barely heard Draco's whispered, "'Night, Potter," before he was asleep.

There was a moment, sometime in the very early hours of the morning, when he stirred and woke to find Draco pressed against him, warm and comforting. He smiled and went back to sleep.

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Over the next week, Harry and Draco fell into a routine. Kingsley had been as good as his word and they had been contacted by the head of the Ministry's Department of Magical Maintenance and Repair and given volunteer assistant jobs with the Hogwarts castle repair crew. They spent a couple of hours each morning at St Mungo's with Lucius and Narcissa and the rest of the day at Hogwarts, revisiting the hospital in the late afternoon before going home for dinner.

The work at Hogwarts was challenging and interesting to Harry. He worked alongside Draco most of the time, using the same spells Draco had taught him, as well as new spells he learned from the repair crew staff. It was heartbreaking to see the extent of the damage that had been done to the castle he loved so much. Windows were broken, huge chunks of wall blown apart. Rubble was everywhere. He and Draco did smaller detail work, repairing tapestries and statues, suits of armour, furniture, and paintings. There was an immense amount of work to be done before the school could reopen again. But every day, the progress was evident.

Harry came home every evening tired but feeling he had accomplished a great deal. After dinner, he did more repair work on the house, working his way quickly from the first floor up to Regulus's and Sirius's rooms, until the entire house had been restored and renovated. Harry could sense the completed

wholeness of the house and it felt right, like he belonged to it now, and it to him.

Once the restoration work on the house was completed, Harry sat in the drawing room in the evenings with Draco and studied the Auror Handbook and Advanced Spell book that Kingsley had sent. Draco still studied his Healing texts, but he was also reading the books on wandlore and dreams that Kreacher had brought back from the Manor. Interesting passages were read aloud and discussed, but nothing new about Harry's dreams or the wands was discovered.

At night, they talked for a while after they got into bed. Draco asked questions about Harry's adventures over the last year and Harry told him the stories of how they'd broken into the Ministry to steal Slytherin's locket from Dolores Umbridge and how they'd broken out of Gringotts on the back of a dragon. Harry explained about the Horcruxes and how he'd decided to search for the Horcruxes instead of the Hallows, even though, in the end, he'd ended up with the Hallows too.

Draco frequently interrupted those stories to say, "You're making that up," with a grin. But he was very serious when Harry told the story of how he'd walked into the Forbidden Forest with his parents, going to meet Voldemort, prepared to die, and how Draco's mother had told the lie that had saved Harry's life and brought about a way for her to be reunited with her son.

Draco told his stories, too, of the year at school with the Carrows' brutality and of the terrifying holidays at home with the Dark Lord, days when he never knew if some cruel whim or other would mean his death, his life snuffed out with no more importance than a match.

Harry had gone to visit the Weasleys one afternoon after taking Draco to St Mungo's and had played Quick Quidditch for a while with Ginny. The tension between the two of them eased and it almost seemed like old times, like when they'd practiced for the Gryffindor team at Hogwarts. Harry used George's old broom, but that just made him realise how much he missed his lost Firebolt. Maybe, he thought, he should buy a new broom to replace it, though it hurt to know that he'd lost Sirius's gift. A new broom would never hold quite the same significance, but if he did get a new broom, he found himself wondering if Malfoy would like to fly with him. Harry left that afternoon feeling both better and worse about his relationship with Ginny. They'd fallen back into a more comfortable camaraderie, but that seemed to confirm Harry's fears that they'd broken up, and he left feeling rather miserable.

He talked to Draco about it in bed that night.

Draco was not sympathetic. "You could have anyone, Potter," he said, sounding exasperated. "She's an idiot." Then Draco turned over with his back to Harry and put an end to the conversation.

For several minutes, Harry stared at the back of Draco's head and neck, which was all he could see of the annoying git from under the bedclothes, feeling confused and frustrated. He didn't want anyone. He wanted Ginny and it was completely silly that looking at the back of Draco's neck was filling his heart with a warm, fuzzy feeling. He turned over with a huff and put that out firmly of his mind.

They saw Andromeda and Teddy often at St Mungo's. Andromeda sat with her sister while Harry held his baby godson. One morning, after Harry had held and played with Teddy for several minutes, he'd unceremoniously handed the baby over to Draco. Draco had looked horrified. But as they talked to Andromeda about her sister's condition and the risky potion that the Healers now felt should be administered, Harry glanced over to see that Draco was gazing down, entranced, grinning at his tiny cousin. Then Harry laughed. Teddy's hair was exactly the same colour as Draco's. "I think he likes me," said Draco softly, smiling like a loon, and Harry knew that Draco's reluctant heart had surrendered without a fight.

Throughout these days, Harry often found himself looking up at odd moments, looking for Draco. And more often than not, he would find Draco watching him, an enigmatic expression in those light gray eyes that was far removed from the hostility of their school days.

And maybe it was because of how hard they were working and how tired they were at night, but Harry did not dream of the Waiting Place. He hoped, perhaps, that the dreams had stopped, but he was too busy to think much about it.

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Harry and Draco had ust settled down with their books in the drawing room one evening when voices sounded downstairs in the entrance hall.

"Harry! Harry? We're home!"

Ron and Hermione! Harry jumped up from the armchair. Draco came off the sofa like an electrocuted cat. They froze, staring wildly at each other.

"Home?" mouthed Draco. He looked ready to bolt from the room.

"Stay!" mouthed Harry back.

There was silence downstairs and then Harry heard Ron's hushed, incredulous voice say, "Blimey, Hermione! Are we in the right house? It's so clean! What happened to the traps?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure we are..." Then Hermione gave a little shriek. "Ron," she said. "The portrait!"

"Aaargh!" There was another moment of silence. "That's just bloody scary, that is," said Ron.

"Harry?" called Hermione again, her voice uncertain. "Are you here?"

"Upstairs!" shouted Harry. "Drawing room!" He shooed Draco back to the sofa. Footsteps were coming up the stairs. He sat back down in the armchair and picked up his book. He glared meaningfully at Draco, and after a moment's hesitation, Draco did the same. By the time Ron and Hermione stepped into the drawing room, both Harry and Draco were apparently completely at ease, reading their books, as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening at all.

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione. "The house looks amazing!" She rushed forward and he stood up to hug her. "We came straight here from London," she said. "It's so good to be home." She turned to look around the room, finally caught sight of Draco on the couch, and gasped.

Ron had seen him first, however, and already had his wand drawn. "Harry?" he said, furiously. "What's he doing here?"

"Put that away, Ron," said Harry sternly. "Everything is fine. But it's a long story." He looked at both of their astonished expressions and then at Draco who was frowning at him from behind his book. It was going to be an interesting evening.

Ollie twittered from his perch by the window and Harry turned to look at him. The owl bobbed and then flew to Harry's arm when he held it out. "Hermione, Ron," said Harry, vowing to give Ollie extra treats tonight for his timely distraction, "this is Apollo - Ollie for short." Ollie walked up Harry's arm and butted his head against Harry's cheek. "I went to buy a new owl and he picked me," said Harry, scratching the owl under the chin.

"He's adorable, Harry," said Hermione, glancing nervously from the owl back to Draco. Ron was still watching Draco, but he had lowered his wand.

"He bites," said Draco, setting his book down. He held out his arm and Ollie flew to him. "But only if you insult him or call him Merwyn. Isn't that right, Apollo?" Ollie bobbed and twittered happily. Harry gave Draco a look. "What?" said Draco. "His name is Apollo. I'm not calling him Ollie."

"Actually, Harry," said Hermione, evidently deciding to take charge of something familiar, "I'm glad you have an owl. We need to let Molly and Arthur know we're back. Do you think Ollie would take a letter for us?"

"Sure," said Harry. "There's parchment and quills in the writing desk." Draco got up, took Ollie back to his perch and gave the owl a treat. Ron's and Hermione's staring eyes followed him across the room. "Er..." said Harry. "How was Australia? How are your parents, Hermione?"

"They're fine. They love Australia. I..."

Draco wandered back, sat on the sofa again, and resumed reading his book.

"I'll just write a quick note to Molly and then we can talk about... this..." said Hermione, still staring at Draco.

"I'm right here in the room," said Draco, without looking up.

"No joke," said Ron, under his breath. "Forget the letter, Hermione. Harry, why is Malfoy sitting on your sofa? Why would you even let the slimy git in the house?" Then he scowled at Draco and said, "Go home! We don't want you here."

Draco looked up from his book, his expression obstinate. "I live here," he said. "Maybe you should go home."

"No way!" said Ron. "You can't live here! I live here."

Both Ron and Draco turned to glare at Harry. "You said you had this house to yourself," said Draco.

"I do," said Harry. "Er... that is, I did... while they were in Australia. I didn't know you'd be here so long, then."

Hermione, Ron, and Draco were all staring at Harry with various expressions of puzzlement, outrage, and indignation. Harry sat back down in the armchair and faced them squarely. "Ron, put your wand away," he said. "This is my house and Malfoy is staying. Write your letter, Hermione, and then we'll talk. This story is going to take a while."

There was a prickly silence in the air while Hermione wrote a short note to the Weasleys. Ron reluctantly pocketed his wand, but he kept a watchful eye on Malfoy the entire time. Draco picked up his book and appeared to be reading, ignoring them all.

After Ollie flew off with the letter, Harry explained all that had happened since his friends had left for Australia. He told them how he'd dreamed of Narcissa Malfoy, about the attack on Malfoy Manor, and why Malfoy could not go back home. He also told them about how Malfoy had helped him restore the house, how Charlie had broken Mad-Eye's curses on the door, about how they had tricked Mrs Black's portrait, and how they were using the same spells now to help out with the repairs at Hogwarts. Ron's expression remained stony throughout, but Hermione's had softened considerably by the time Harry finished telling the tale. "Malfoy and I are working hard to put the past behind us," he said at last. "He's as welcome to stay here as both of you are. But I think we all have to agree that the war is over. There's been enough fighting, and I won't have it now in my home."

"You're right, Harry, of course," said Hermione. She was gazing at Draco much more sympathetically now. "I'm sorry about your mother, Malfoy," she said. "Harry told us how she helped him that night in the forest. I hope she's going to be okay."

Draco looked up and met Hermione's eyes. "Thank you," he said stiffly. "It's been very difficult."

Harry barely managed not to laugh. Malfoy was doing the kicked puppy face again and Hermione appeared to be falling for it as badly as he had himself. It was gratifying to know that he wasn't the only gullible one.

Ron, however, was not having it. He turned from frowning at Draco to look at Harry with an expression of confusion and misery and what-the-bloody-hell-were-you-thinking-mate? all mixed together on his redder than usual, freckled face.

Harry gave him a small shrug and tried to look apologetic.

Meanwhile, Hermione had noticed Draco's books. She moved to sit on the sofa and picked one from the stack on the side table. "Oh, how interesting," she exclaimed softly, after reading the title. She looked up at Draco. "Are you going to study Healing?" she asked, with genuine interest.

Draco's expression brightened immediately. "I want to," he said, and then shook his head. "But I'll need

my N.E.W.T.S. and that's not likely to happen, now."

Hermione smiled smugly and looked from Draco to Harry. "I have wonderful news, Harry," she said excitedly. "And I don't see why Malfoy can't do it, too, if he wants to. I've been corresponding with Professor McGonagall while we were away and she's agreed to tutor us so that we can take our N.E.W.T.S. even though we missed school last year."

"I knew you'd think of some way around that," said Harry amused.

Ron groaned. "Blimey, Harry," he said quietly, as Hermione began discussing the proposed plan with Draco. "I don't know if I can take any more school..."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I know..."

"Think she'll forget about us, if Malfoy does it?"

Harry grinned. "I dunno. She might."

Ron sighed. "Never mind," he said. "I know better." He looked at Harry and it seemed as if all the fight had drained out of him. "You think Kreacher's got any leftovers down in the kitchen? I'm starved."

"I'm sure he does," said Harry. He and Ron left Hermione and Draco discussing N.E.W.T.S. and Healing and trooped down to the kitchen to get Ron something to eat. By the time they came back upstairs, Harry had heard Ron's version of the entire trip to Australia, including many colourful anecdotes about the amazing ride on the Muggle airplane, and Ron was looking much more relaxed.

They found Draco alone in the drawing room with Ollie, who was back from the Weasleys. "Granger said she was tired, and went up to bed," Draco informed them. "There was a reply owl from your family, Weasley. She took it up with her."

Ron nodded at Draco with a mingled horrified and disbelieving expression, evidently still stunned that he actually had to interact so familiarly with Malfoy here in Harry's house, and then he said goodnight and went upstairs as well.

"Can I just say something," said Harry, after Ron's footsteps had disappeared up the stairs. "And I don't want you to take it the wrong way, but I was surprised tonight. I know it was hard, so thank you for being polite to my friends."

"I can do polite, Potter," sniffed Draco. "Don't know why that surprises you."

"Maybe because I never saw it before..." said Harry, with a small grin. "Or not until recently, anyway."

Draco stood up, returned the book he'd been reading to the stack on the side table, and followed Harry upstairs. "You might have warned me, you know," he said, his voice full of teasing reproach, when they got to the third floor. "I nearly died from shock when they walked straight into the house."

"You and me, both," said Harry, laughing as he walked into his bedroom. He came back out a few moments later because Draco was standing in the middle of the landing, looking torn and uncertain.

"I guess I should stay in there, now," Draco said softly, frowning at the bedroom across the hall from Harry's.

A sudden flood of awareness hit Harry. He would miss their nightly talks; he would miss Draco's comforting presence in his bed. It was an extremely sobering realisation, and one he didn't want to examine too carefully. "No, it's okay. No one has to know," said Harry.

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The Waiting Place was a wide green field. Forming out of the white mist were brightly coloured banners and stands and golden goalposts with hoops at the top. A Quidditch pitch. A short, balding, white-haired man stood at the centre of the field. Harry, smiling and barefoot and dressed in his white robes, walked out to meet him.

"Hello," said Harry.

"Oh! I know you!" said the man, beaming. "Aren't you that Potter boy, the one that killed the Dark Wizard Voldy-something?"

Harry laughed. "That's me," he said. "I'm Harry."

"Oh, that's right. Harry Potter!" The old man smiled. "I'm Ebenezer Mackenzie-Smythe. I'm what you call a Muggle, my boy, but my wife was a witch. She passed on nearly a year ago." His face sobered at that, and then he went on, his voice quiet, as if he were talking more to himself than to Harry. "I never realised how much I would miss her and all her funny little magic ways, until she was gone." He sighed and looked off into the distance. "I was hoping she would be here..."

After a moment, he looked back at Harry and curiosity sparkled in his eyes. "But now why would you be here instead?"

"I have no idea," said Harry. He looked at the stands and banners that surrounded them. "Where are we?" he asked.

Ebenezer chuckled. "I would have thought that you of all people would recognize a Quidditch pitch," he said. "Didn't you play Seeker for the Gryffindor team at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, of course," said Harry. "But how did you know that?"

"Oh, I know everything about Quidditch. My wife, Sarah, was a Chaser for Hufflepuff back in her school days. That was a long time ago, but she never lost her love for the sport, and I took it up as well after we were married. We came to many of the Hogwarts games when Hufflepuff played. Never missed a World Cup final." He looked around the pitch with a wistful expression. "I always wished I could play, you know. Ride one of those magic brooms. Catch the Golden Snitch..."

Harry grinned. "Then, I think that's why I'm here," he said, suddenly sure of it. "To help you do that."

Ebenezer looked at Harry, and for a moment, excitement and hope glowed on his face, but then he shook his head, unconvinced. "But I'm a Muggle, dear boy," he said. "I can't."

"I dunno," said Harry. "I think maybe here you can." He turned in place for a moment, then smiled. "Look!" he said, pointing, as a small trunk formed out of the mist. Beside the trunk lay two serviceable practice brooms, like the ones used in flying lessons at Hogwarts. "Yes!" said Harry. "I'm sure you can!"

Harry showed Ebenezer how to mount the broomstick and taught him the proper hand grip and the basics of controlling it. In no time at all, the old man was zooming around inside the stadium as if he'd done it all his life, an expression of absolute delight on his face. Harry flew with him, grinning, enjoying himself immensely. This was, without a doubt, the most fun visit to the Waiting Place he'd ever had.

"Ready to release the Snitch, sir?" called Harry, when he was sure Ebenezer was flying capably.

"Ready!" called Ebenezer, with an excited wave.

Harry flew down to the small trunk and took out the Golden Snitch. Its silver wings unfurled as he held it up in his hand, and then with a tiny hum, they fluttered to life and Harry let it go. The Snitch shot straight up, zigzagging fast, a streak of flashing gold in the pure white light of the Waiting Place. It was a beautiful, joyous sight. Then in a wink, it disappeared into the mist.

Harry flew up to join Ebenezer. They turned in place, waiting, watching for that telltale flash of gold...

"There!" whispered Harry. "By the goalposts."

A predatory grin appeared on Ebenezer's face, and he sped off, bent low over his broom. Harry flew a little behind him, keeping pace, but staying back. This was Ebenezer's party, and Harry did not intend to compete with him for the capture.

The Snitch darted away, zigzagging again, but Ebenezer stuck to it, gaining on it, little by little, his face a mask of delighted concentration. Harry cheered him on and Ebenezer gave a triumphant whoop of glee when his fingers finally closed around the elusive golden ball.

Back on the ground, after Harry had stowed the Golden Snitch back in the trunk, Ebenezer held his broom in his hands, looking down on it fondly. "This has been my lifelong dream," he said softly, "and even more so after I found that beautiful flying broom in the garden last July. It was torture to have it and not be able to fly it." He looked up at Harry. "Thank you, my dear boy, from the bottom of my heart. You've made an old man very happy." He smiled, his eyes misty. "I know I need to go on. I think I can do that now."

Harry nodded, his attention still snagged by what Ebenezer had said just a moment ago. "You found a broom? Last July?" he asked, and a shock of excitement ran through him.

"Yes, it was the oddest thing," said Ebenezer. "It was about a week or so after my Sarah died, and I was out in the back garden looking up at the stars, and wondering, you know... if she was up there somewhere. Then suddenly there were fireworks overhead and something came spinning down out of the sky and landed in the tree right there in my garden. I had to get the ladder to get it down, but it was the most beautiful broom I've ever seen. I knew right away it was a flying broom, and understood that a wizard must have been flying over and lost it. I thought many times that I should try to return it to its rightful owner, but with Sarah gone, and me being a Muggle and all, I never did."

Harry could not keep the huge grin from his face. This, surely, was his long lost Firebolt that had fallen from the motorcycle sidecar when he'd been attacked after leaving the Dursleys'. "You're not going to believe this," he said, certainty thrumming through him, "but that happened to me. I lost my broom

somewhere over Muggle Surrey last July, the 27th; it was a Saturday night. Do you mind if I ask where you live?"

"Why that's it exactly!" exclaimed Ebenezer. "My house is in the suburbs of Guilford. And it was a Saturday night. Imagine that!" Then he looked serious for a moment. "Oh, but my boy, you must get it back, and quickly. The solicitors will be in to auction everything off now that I'm dead." He shook his head, beaming again at Harry. "What an amazing coincidence!"

Harry was beginning to understand that this was no coincidence at all. Whatever power it was that was drawing him to the Waiting Place, it was not coincidence.

Ebenezer told him the address and Harry promised to go straight away. "We have a tall fence so it's safe to Apparate into the back garden," said Ebenezer. "Sarah did it all the time. And you'll find the broom in the garden shed there."

"Thank you, sir," said Harry, elated and deeply grateful. "My godfather gave me that broom. It was very special to me."

Ebenezer grinned. "Then we've each done each other a good turn, haven't we?" Then he looked up suddenly, past Harry, into the distance. "Oh!"

Harry turned to see a column of light descending from above. Spiralling down inside it, he could just make out a figure on a broom.

"Sarah!" breathed Ebenezer. He mounted the broom he still held, and then turned to Harry. "Goodbye, Harry, my boy," he said. "You take good care of that broom. It's a beauty!"

"Yes, sir, I will," said Harry. He watched as Ebenezer flew away, up into the column of light to meet his wife. Within a few moments, they were gone, and everything dissolved into the white mist and disappeared.

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Harry woke with a jolt. Malfoy, as usual, was snuggled up against him, but he didn't care. With a surge of excitement, he remembered his dream. He threw back the bedclothes and jumped up, pulling on his clothes from the day before. The light in the windows was pale, barely dawn. Perfect. He could go right now to get his broom and no one would know.

Draco stirred and sat up just as Harry was pulling on his trainers. Malfoy's hair was sticking up on one side and he was frowning, glancing at the window with squinting eyes. "Where are you going at this hour, Potter?" he asked. He sounded genuinely curious, then his eyes opened wider and he stared at Harry with comprehension. "You've had one of those dreams, haven't you? Of someone dead." A look of apprehension crossed his face. "It's not my mother is it?"

"No, of course not," said Harry. "I would have woken you if it was."

Draco relaxed visibly, and curiosity showed on his face again. "Is it someone at St Mungo's?"

Harry grinned. "No, it's not a someone this time. It's my Firebolt!" He could barely contain his happiness at the thought of having his beloved broom back, and for a moment, he was very pleased that Malfoy had woken up so that he had someone to tell about it. Then he realised that telling someone before Apparating off on his own was probably a wise precaution anyway.

He quickly explained everything to Draco, including the address of the house where he was going. "If I'm not back in half an hour, get one of the Aurors outside to come, okay?"

But Harry wasn't gone more than ten minutes before he Apparated back into the bedroom, his Firebolt in one hand and a huge, elated grin on his face. He sat down on the edge of the bed, the Firebolt cradled in his lap, and gazed at it dumbfounded, simply stunned that it had come back to him after all this time.

A slim, pale hand reached out to stroke the gleaming ash handle and Harry had a sudden inspiration. He turned to Draco. "Want to fly this with me later?" he asked. Draco's pleased smile was answer enough.

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When Ron and Hermione came down to breakfast that morning, Harry was waiting for them, a huge, excited grin on his face.

"Look what I have," he said, and he held the Firebolt up for them to see. Draco was sitting at the table smirking, since he already knew the story.

"Wow, Harry!" said Ron. "A new Firebolt! That's brilliant!"

"Yeah, but it's even better than that. It's not a new one," said Harry. "It's my same old one! The one Sirius gave me. The one I lost."

"You're joking! How'd you get it back?" Ron was piling his plate with toast and sausages, his face as excited as Harry's. Draco and Hermione exchanged an amused glance that, a split second later, scared them both, and they looked hastily away.

Harry described his dream and told them how he'd gone to the house in Surrey to find his broom stored safely in a garden shed. Ron was suitably impressed, but Hermione was not.

"So you're still having these dreams, Harry?" she asked. "You dreamed of Fred, and Narcissa Malfoy, and now this man, a Muggle, who you don't even know. Have there been others?"

"Er... yeah," said Harry, remembering his promise to tell Ron and Hermione about the dreams if he was

still having them when they got back from Australia. "Not so much last week," he said, but maybe every other night or so, before that."

"And they're real people who have died? You're sure?"

"Yeah, Hermione," said Harry, a little amused. "I'm sure. I've talked to their family at St Mungo's or seen the obituary, or other proof, like the Malfoys being attacked, or going to get the Firebolt right where I was told it was."

"I have a theory about it," said Draco, speaking up for the first time. For a second, Ron and Hermione both looked startled, as if they'd forgotten he was in the room. Draco smirked at them over his teacup. "Harry and I have discussed it at length and I think he's having the dreams because he is the owner of all the Deathly Hallows. The story says that the one who unites all the Hallows becomes the Master of Death. We don't know exactly what that means, but meeting people who have died every night might be one interpretation." He finished his bite of toast and took a sip of tea, evidently enjoying having everyone's attention.

"But you don't have all three of the Hallows, Harry," said Hermione. "I thought you said you lost the Resurrection Stone."

"We believe that losing it doesn't change his ownership of it," said Draco. "We were wondering what he should do about the Elder Wand as well."

"Right," said Harry. "When I was duelling Voldemort in the Great Hall, I stupidly announced to everyone, including the Death Eaters, that I was Master of the Elder Wand. I never thought about the consequences of that until I heard from Ollivander last week. He had heard about it and he wasn't even there. I'm afraid I'm going to be a target now for anyone who's been looking for that wand. Now everyone will know where it is." Harry was gratified to see that Hermione and Ron both looked as worried about that idea as he was. "I need to figure out a way to get rid of the Elder Wand without letting it fall into anyone else's hands. I don't want it to continue its bloody history into the future."

"What's interesting," said Draco, "is that the Elder Wand is also one of the Hallows. So he needs to get rid of it for two reasons. To prevent any attacks from the idiots out there who want to win the wand from

him, and, if my theory is correct, to stop the dreams. What I don't know is if he needs to get rid of one, or all, of the Hallows to stop the dreams." He paused and looked squarely at Hermione. "I brought some books from the Manor," he went on. "Books on dreams and wandlore. I've been studying those to see if I can learn anything helpful."

Harry was very grateful suddenly that Malfoy was there to help him explain it all. It was strange, but he knew Malfoy was on his side, that they agreed about the questions posed by the wands and the Hallows. He wasn't sure what Hermione would make of it all, and was glad he didn't have to face her sometimes bossy inquisitiveness alone.

"I'd like to see those books, Malfoy," said Hermione.

"They're in the drawing room," said Draco. "Be my guest."

Ron and Hermione were headed to the Burrow that morning, but Hermione remembered that Harry had mentioned helping with the repair work at Hogwarts. She wondered if she and Ron could help too. So Harry gave them the name of the supervisor they worked for and told them that he and Draco would meet them at Hogwarts after they visited Narcissa. Draco offered to teach them the architectural restoration spells and Harry was amused to see Hermione's eyes light up at the prospect of learning new magic.

At St Mungo's, Healer Pye was waiting for Draco. It was time, he felt, for them to start the potion treatment he wanted to try, to help Narcissa regain consciousness. The combination of Invigoration Draught, Strengthening Solution, and Mandrake Root would be administered a few drops at a time under the tongue, every hour around the clock for the next forty-eight hours. Draco signed the forms to allow them to proceed, but Harry could tell that he was worried about it. The potion was experimental, and therefore unpredictable.

After leaving the hospital, they popped back to Grimmauld Place to pick up Harry's Firebolt, and then they met Ron and Hermione at Hogwarts. Draco taught them the spells, and the four of them worked together as a team. Once they had completed their repair work for the day, Harry, Draco, and Ron took turns flying the Firebolt around the Quidditch pitch. Harry had no words for how fantastic it felt to fly his Firebolt again.

While the boys were flying, Hermione visited Professor McGonagall to finalize their plans for taking their N.E.W.T.S. She asked if Malfoy could work with them, and after smoothing over McGonagall's initial surprised reluctance, was able to tell Draco that he would be included. Back at Grimmauld Place later, she spent the afternoon reading Malfoy's books on dreams.

It was after dinner that evening, when they were all gathered in the drawing room, that Hermione announced that she thought she'd found something. She was reading one of Draco's books: The Universal Imagery of Dreams by Aisling M. Orpheus. "There's a chapter in here," she said, "about people who all had similar dream-like experiences after taking the Draught of Living Death. Evidently, many of them reported walking in a place filled with white mist and light, where they sometimes met loved ones who had died. Does that sound anything like what you've experienced, Harry?"

Harry put his Auror Handbook down and stared at Hermione, astonished. He was sure he'd never described the Waiting Place or the shining white mist that he always encountered there. "That's exactly like what I've seen," he said, excited by this revelation, that other people had seen the same thing. "But what good does that do us?" he asked. "I'm already going there."

"But you don't have control over when you go there," said Draco, his book also forgotten. He had an eager, questioning look in his eyes. "And I was thinking..." He paused, looking at Hermione. "It might be far-fetched, but the only way I can think of for Potter to permanently get rid of the Hallows, without giving them to someone else and allowing the bloody history to continue, is for him to take them back where they came from. He needs to give them back to Death."

Hermione looked annoyed for a moment. "Then you really believe that children's story, that Death created these things?"

Draco shrugged. "If you have a better idea..."

"I'm with Malfoy," said Ron suddenly. Everyone looked at him, surprised. His face turned a little red. "If Harry takes the Draught of Living Death, then maybe he can go to that misty place and call up Death and return the Hallows and that will solve all the problems."

"Ron," said Hermione, with fond patience, "how is he going to take the Hallows there if he's only dreaming? It's impossible."

"Oh, right," said Ron, deflated. "Forgot about that."

Harry and Draco exchanged an electrified glance. "The bear!" whispered Harry and Draco nodded.

"Yes! It's not impossible, Granger," said Draco. "He's done it before."

Harry explained about the teddy bear that he'd wished for and given to Edmund in the Waiting Place, and how that bear had been missing from the table the next day. Harry told them how wishes or thoughts seemed to take form in that place, forming right out of the mist and the light. He could tell that Hermione was sceptical, but he was sure now that maybe they were on the right track. This was definitely something they could try.

"Harry, do you honestly believe that you can wish for the Hallows and they will come to you?" Hermione's voice was definitely sceptical, and getting a little shrill. "That's rubbish and you know it."

Harry shrugged. "All I know is that I had a teddy bear here in the house, that I wished for it when I was in one of the dreams, and then it was there in my hand in the dream. When I looked for it here the next morning, it was not here. Draco saw that it was missing, too."

"That's right, I did," said Draco.

"Well, there's still the problem of the potion," argued Hermione. "Where are we going to get the Draught of Living Death? The ingredients are not exactly easy to obtain."

Harry and Draco exchanged another look and Harry burst out laughing. Draco looked very pleased with

himself.

"We have a bottle of it down in the kitchen," said Draco. "Potter and I made it last week."

Hermione did not look pleased at having all her arguments countered so handily.

"I do see one problem," said Harry. "How am I supposed to call Death?"

"Assuming there is such a being, you can always try wishing for him," said Hermione, acerbically. "Since you're so sure wishing will work with the Hallows, why not on Death too?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "That's brilliant, Hermione!" He grinned at her, and she looked somewhat mollified.

"I still don't think it will work..." she said. "But I don't see any harm in trying it." She turned back a few pages in the book. "There are a few minor risks associated with taking the Draught of Living Death, though. We should be certain it's safe before you do, Harry."

Draco flipped back to the index of his Healing text. "There's a chapter on Potions in here with prescriptions for dosage and the required care for patients when they're administered." He skimmed down through the listings. "Living Death, Draught of," he read with a grin. After turning to the page and reading for a moment, he handed the book to Hermione. "There are some monitoring spells given here. But you'll have to do them. I don't trust my wand enough to try them myself."

Hermione read the spells, nodding. "These seem simple enough," she said. "And there's a Reviving Charm that can be used as an antidote, if the person doesn't wake up after a certain length of time." She looked back up at Harry and suddenly she was smiling again. "Okay," she said. "I think we can try it." Then she looked a little sheepish. "I guess after finding out the Resurrection Stone actually works, I shouldn't be so surprised that this might work too."

"All right, then," said Harry. The sooner he got rid of the Elder Wand, the better. "I want to try it now."

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Within a short time, the four of them were gathered in Harry's bedroom with everything they needed. Hermione sat in Harry's desk chair with the reference books in her lap, though she had already memorized the spells. She conjured a second chair for Ron. Harry sat on the edge of the bed, waiting while Draco poured the correct dose of potion into a cup.

"I hate giving this back," said Ron, gazing woefully at the Invisibility Cloak which Harry had laid at the foot of the bed. "That Cloak was dead useful."

"Yeah," said Harry. "It saved our lives more than once." He hated to give it up too, not just because of the memories it held, but because it was a legacy from his father's family. But he had decided that he had to give all of the Hallows back, not just the ones he didn't want. He took the cup of potion from Draco and held it up in a mock toast. "To Death and dreams," he said with a grin, then drank it down.

The potion tasted like dried flowers, dusty and slightly sweet. Harry set the empty cup on the bedside table, took off his glasses and set them there too, then laid back on the bed. Draco came around to the far side of the bed and climbed up to sit in the place where he slept. Harry closed his eyes, aware of the dip of the mattress that meant Draco was there with him, and that felt reassuring.

"We'll stay right here, Harry," whispered Hermione. "If you don't wake up in three hours, I'll do the antidote charm."

"Thanks" whispered Harry. He trusted these three people, and he indeed had to include Malfoy in that number now. He knew he would be safe, as safe as if he'd only fallen asleep as usual.

A light dizziness swirled through him. Then the bed dipped, and he felt Malfoy lean over him.

"Don't forget you're Harry Potter," whispered Draco. "Don't forget you're the Master of the Deathly Hallows, the Master of Death."

"Right," whispered Harry, but he didn't feel his lips move. The bed seemed to sway beneath him like a boat on water, and then he was pulled down and down, into a spinning vortex of darkness.

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The Waiting Place was different. It was similar to Harry's first experience here, where it appeared to be like King's Cross station, but it was different in quality. There was an exquisite, sharpened clarity to everything; everything seemed to glow with an inner radiance and a sheen of prismatic colour rippled and danced over the surfaces. The great domed ceiling arched high overhead, sparkling and transparent, revealing a velvet black space beyond filled with bright planets and glittering stars. Harry stood for a long moment simply staring in awe. He felt deeply, down to the core of his being, that he stood now on sacred ground.

He felt then a moment of... not fear... but hesitation. He did not want to die, and there was the very real chance that he would not return from this place a second time. He took a deep breath and accepted this. He felt love and trust well up in his heart for his friends and for Malfoy who watched over him at home, anchoring him to life, and he took that trust and that love and wrapped those emotions around himself as a living shield. Then remembering his task, Harry closed his eyes and concentrated.

The Invisibility Cloak was closest; he knew exactly where it was, at the foot of his bed. He thought of it, imagined himself wearing it as he had so many times in the past and wished it was here with him now in this place... and it was. He felt its familiar weight settle over his shoulders. He let out a breath and smiled his relief. It was working!

The Elder Wand was not with him physically, but he knew where it was. It was hidden in the secret cavity behind Dumbledore's portrait in the headmaster's office at Hogwarts. He envisioned it now in his mind, saw himself there in the office as he pictured the memory Snape had given him, saw the portrait swing forward, and himself reaching in to take the wand. It was there in his hand in his mind's eye and he

wished for it to be here in his hand now... and instantly, the feeling of that slim wood handle was there within his grasp. He opened his eyes, amazed, and it was true. He now held the Elder Wand in his right hand.

The third Hallow, the Resurrection Stone, was not quite as straightforward as the first two. Harry didn't know exactly where it was, but he remembered the clearing where he'd dropped it, the clearing where the gigantic spider Aragog had once lived, the clearing where Voldemort had set up his camp. Picturing that space in his mind, he saw himself standing again there at the edge, with the firelight flickering, his parents and Sirius and Remus Lupin beside him, the Stone just that moment still in his hand. He held out his left hand palm up, and wished for the Stone to be here now... and a small cold weight fell into his hand. He had it!

Harry opened his eyes and as he stood in that hallowed place, barefoot, dressed in shining white robes, with the Cloak of Invisibility over his shoulders, the Elder Wand in his right hand and the Resurrection Stone in his left, he knew himself to be who he was: Harry Potter, Master of the Deathly Hallows, Master of Death. With that knowledge held foremost in his mind, he wished for Death to meet him face to face.

There was an instantaneous surge of presence, electric and visceral. Death stood before Harry, an immense figure robed in darkness, a bottomless black space beneath the cowl where a face should be. Its very existence seemed to eclipse the light in the place where they stood. More than anything its appearance reminded Harry of a monstrous Dementor.

And yet... this being did not feel at all like a Dementor. There was no evil here. There was instead an unfathomable calm at the core of this presence. Stillness... rest... peace... a sense of release from all cares... flowed out from this being like balm. With sudden insight, Harry realised that Dementors were in reality only pitiful, twisted, evil copies of this towering, potent immortal being. In the next instant, he knew and understood several things. That the Deathly Hallows were like child's toys, small and insignificant, they had no power over Death at all. That he, Harry Potter, so-called Master of Death, was no such thing. Death itself had no mortal Master. Here, face-to-face with Death, he was at the mercy of Death. Here he was bare and defenceless.

Harry, reeling from the sudden stripping away of all his assumptions, stared into the empty, bottomless face of Death and understood, then, one thing more, something even more startling, something that filled him with a deep inner calm. That from this being, from Death, he needed no defence. There was truly nothing to fear.

"You are rare among wizards, Harry Potter, and even rarer among men." The deep, melodious voice that emanated from beneath the cowl of darkness was not loud, but seemed to reverberate around the room. "You do not fear Death?"

"I'm not afraid of dying," said Harry, a little surprised that his voice still worked.

"And yet, you have slipped through my fingers many times," said Death. And Harry heard what might have been amusement in the tone of voice. "Have you come here, now, to make amends for that? Have you come here now to die?"

"No," said Harry, softly, his heart pounding. "I don't want to die. Not now." All the new beginnings in his life flashed before him, and they were very dear. He felt again the living trust and love of his friends that called him back to life. But he had placed himself in Death's hands and it was not up to him. He bowed his head, his eyes fixed upon the shining white floor. "That is for you to say, I think."

"Ah," said Death. The amusement in his voice was unmistakable this time. "No clever schemes, no tricks to win immortality? No desperate attempt to hide, no foolish struggle against the inevitable? Very rare, indeed." Death moved closer. "But then why have you come? And why have you brought these trinkets you hold, these relics from a child's tale?"

Harry looked up. "I... am returning them," he said. "The legend says the Hallows were made by Death. That if anyone joins them all together they will be... Master of Death. I don't know what that means, or if it means anything at all, but since I've had all of the Hallows, I keep coming back here. I keep dreaming of people who have died." He paused, but could not sense any reaction from the empty faceless space beneath the cowl. "I had hoped..." he went on, determinedly, "that if I gave the Hallows back, I would stop dreaming of the dead. But I also want to give them back because I don't want them. I want to stop the bloody history and insanity they've caused. That's why I'm here."

"You don't want an invincible wand, Harry Potter?" asked Death. "Or the power to summon your loved ones back from beyond the grave?"

"No," said Harry. "I..." For a fleeting second he thought of his mother and father and Remus and Sirius standing with him in the Forbidden Forest, and his heart ached to know he would never see them again. But he was resolute. "I don't want them," he said.

Death nodded once and held out a black skeletal hand. Harry gave him the Elder Wand and the Resurrection Stone. "And what of the other?" asked Death. "What of the Invisibility Cloak you wear? That one, I sense, is different..."

Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak from his shoulders and held it in his hands. He stroked the shimmering fabric. "It is different," he said softly. "It was my dad's. It's all I have left of him." He looked back at Death, regretful but determined to achieve his purpose here. "But I want to give it back, to stop the violent history of the Hallows, to stop the dreams."

"The violence will end now that the Wand and the Stone have left the living world." Death closed his hand over the two Hallows he held, and in a flash of light, they were gone. "The desire they created for men to possess them will also vanish. You need not fear this. No one will seek them now."

Harry breathed out a sigh of relief at that. He stroked the Invisibility Cloak once more fondly, then held it out, feeling that ache in his heart again. "Here," he said. "You should have this back too."

Death did not take the Cloak. "In all the history of the Hallows' sojourn in the realm of the living, you are the first who has ever sought, wisely and unselfishly, to return them. Therefore, the Cloak is my gift to you," said Death. "Because it is your rightful inheritance and because you do not desire it for selfish gain, but rather out of love, you may keep the Cloak as long as you live. When it is your time to go on, then I will take it back."

"What about my dreams?" said Harry, though his heart had leapt at the thought of keeping the Cloak. "Will the dreams stop, if I still have one of the Hallows?"

"But it is not the Hallows that have caused your dreams," said Death. "You crossed through the gate between life and death as a willing sacrifice, but you did not die. There is great power in the act of sacrifice, and that power is sealed by death. When you chose to return to life, this power was not sealed and instead holds the gate open between yourself and the first transitional realm of death. That gate will

close when you complete the sacrifice, by going on."

"Then, you're saying I will have these dreams for the rest of my life?" Harry asked, stunned.

"The open gate is a rare gift, Harry Potter," said Death. "If you wish it, I, myself, can close the gate and you will have no more meetings with the dead. But think well before you choose. It is only the dead who have something to give you, who have a desire or need for you specifically, or for whom you are perfectly placed to carry out a last communication or request, that can call you into death to meet them. Consider all that you have been given through these meetings and think well on what you will be giving up."

This was an entirely new perspective, one Harry had not thought of. "Then I'm not meeting everyone who dies?" And even as he said it, he knew that was impossible. He just hadn't thought it through before. There must be thousands of deaths every day...

Death actually laughed. It was a warm sound, and Harry had to grin at his own foolish question. "You begin to understand," said Death. "There were many who died in the battle at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry who did not wish to see you again. They were not present at the first of your meetings."

"Yeah, that's true," said Harry, thinking of the Death Eaters who had died, and then of Bellatrix, and finally of Snape.

"That soul desired to meet one who will also come to meet you when you go on," said Death, and Harry knew immediately that the soul Death was speaking of was Severus Snape.

"My mother," whispered Harry, and Death nodded once.

Harry was silent then, thinking back on all the meetings he'd had with the dead. He had helped them go on and he had felt a great sense of satisfaction, and even been deeply touched by relaying the messages of the dead to their loved-ones and seeing the relief and peace those messages brought to the grieving families. But then he finally realised what he had not fully seen before. That each of the meetings had also given him a gift he would not have had otherwise. Without the dreams, he would not have known,

by giving the bear to Edmund, how to bring the Hallows back to Death; he would not have helped the Malfoys or taken Draco in, with all that that had brought into his life; he would not have learned about his grandfather; he would never have recovered his lost Firebolt. Even little Agatha Bell had given him the first certainty that his dream meetings were real and a means for reaching out to Draco.

"Oh," said Harry, his heart gone light, joyful. Death stood before him, patiently waiting for his decision. But Harry's heart had already made the choice while his mind was working it out. "I want to keep the dreams," he said. "I don't want to close the gate."

Death nodded again. "So be it. And so it seems, once more, that I must let you go." The voice was amused again.

Harry smiled. "Yes," he said. "For a while longer..." He recalled how, at the ending of "The Tale of the Three Brothers," Ignotus Peverell, Harry's own ancestor, had greeted Death as an old friend, and had gone with him gladly. And Harry knew it would be the same for him, when his time came.

Death drew back and spread his arms wide. "You are indeed rare among wizards, Harry Potter," said Death. His voice was warm and pleased and echoed through the space in which they stood. "Because you do not fear, you may see me as I truly am, without the cloak of darkness that Fear has set upon me." Then Death disappeared into the midst of an intensely bright column of light. The light lasted only a few seconds before it was gone, and then Harry was alone.

But in those few seconds he had seen Death uncloaked. Within the light, he had seen a towering being of light, a being beautiful beyond words with vast, shining, enfolding wings, a being that radiated the most profound sense of blessed peace; the Angel of Death, Giver of Rest.

Harry stood rooted to the spot, completely transfixed by that incredible vision until everything around him dissolved back into the mist and vanished into white.

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Harry came back to consciousness slowly. He felt groggy from the effects of the potion, but he remembered with absolute clarity all that had transpired in his meeting with Death. The fact that the two dangerous Deathly Hallows were now out of his hands and no longer a threat was an immense relief. He sat up, his head spinning a little, and Hermione cast the Reviving Charm from Draco's Healing book. His head cleared almost immediately and he smiled at his friends.

"The Invisibility Cloak disappeared for a moment, but now it's back," said Hermione, disappointment in her voice. "Oh, Harry. I'm sorry. I was afraid it wouldn't work."

"It worked perfectly, Hermione," said Harry. "But I get to keep this." He pulled the Invisibility Cloak into his lap. "Because it was my dad's, I can keep it for the rest of my life."

"And the Elder Wand and the Resurrection Stone...?" asked Draco.

"Death took them back," said Harry. "He told me no one would search for them now that they were no longer in the living world. So we did it! The Deathly Hallows are gone."

"Death told you...? You actually spoke to... Death?" Hermione's eyes were huge. Ron also looked flabbergasted. Draco was grinning smugly as if he'd known that would happen all along.

"But Harry!" exclaimed Hermione. "This is extraordinary! Did you ask him what happens after death? Did you find out where you go when you go on?"

Harry gazed at her, bemused.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, never mind. Of course, you didn't," she sighed. "How silly of me!"

"It didn't come up in the conversation, Hermione," said Harry, chuckling. "I wasn't exactly there to grill

him about stuff, you know."

"Well, what did you say?" she asked. Her cheeks were pink but she was smiling. "I want to know everything."

Harry told them all the details of how he'd returned the Hallows to Death. Of how he'd summoned each of the Hallows in turn to the Waiting Place, how Death had appeared before him, and how Harry had not been sure he would be allowed to return to life. "He let me come back," he said softly, respectfully, "and he let me keep this." He smoothed the Invisibility Cloak over his knees, smiling.

"But what about your dreams, Harry?" asked Hermione. "Now that you've returned the Hallows, will your dreams stop?"

Harry took a deep breath. "No," he said. "It wasn't the Hallows that caused the dreams. Death explained something about a gate that was left open when I came back to life that night during the battle at Hogwarts. It's because of that, that I have the dreams."

"Then, we'll keep searching, Harry, until we find a way to stop them."

"I... no, Hermione. I decided I didn't want to stop them," said Harry firmly. "Death gave me a choice, and I chose to keep them. I'm helping people who need me for some reason, and they've had things to tell me, too."

"But Harry! You can't go on dreaming of dead people for the rest of your life," protested Hermione.

Harry looked around at each of his friends. Hermione looked exasperated and a little annoyed, Ron looked like he agreed with her though he didn't quite understand it all, and Malfoy was looking exasperated and annoyed as well, but he was staring at Hermione, not at Harry.

"There has to be some way to make them stop," Hermione went on. "I'm sure we can find -"

"Granger," said Draco, quietly cutting her off. "Maybe you missed the part where Potter said he wanted the dreams. That he had a choice and decided to keep them. Maybe you should respect that."

Harry felt in that moment that he could have hugged Malfoy. He grinned at Draco and Draco nodded and grinned a small grin back.

Hermione looked from Draco's face to Harry's and huffed in defeat. "I was only thinking of what's best for him," she said, her face turning pink again.

"I know you were, Hermione," said Harry. "And I appreciate it. But Malfoy's right. I need you to respect my decision."

"Fine," she said. She turned an appraising eye on Draco, but held her tongue.

"At least you got the keep the Cloak," said Ron, with a grin. "That was bloody decent of him, that was."

Harry most definitely agreed. He folded the Cloak carefully and laid it on his desk. "I'm still a little sleepy from the potion," he said. "I think I'll just go to bed now, if that's okay. We can talk more about this tomorrow."

Hermione and Ron said goodnight and Draco followed them out. Harry knew Draco would pretend to go into his room across the hall, but that he'd be back. Harry thought about that as he got undressed and got into bed. It was admittedly a very weird situation, but he didn't want to change it.

Sure enough, when Draco was certain that the coast was clear, he crept back into Harry's bedroom, dressed in his pyjama trousers, and got into bed. Harry put out the gas light and the room fell into darkness, lit only by the clear pale moonlight from the high windows.

"What was Death like?" whispered Draco. "You didn't say. Was he like the story of the Hallows? Was he terrifying?"

"No," said Harry. He'd felt reluctant to talk about this earlier, but with Draco here in the darkened room, he welcomed the chance. "That's the funny thing. He wasn't terrifying at all, except that I knew I had absolutely no power over him. All that stuff we thought about the Hallows and being Master of Death, was nothing. I was completely at his mercy, and he let me go." He paused. "He looked like a huge Dementor, like in the story, I guess, with a dark cloak and hood. Under the hood, there was no face at all. But what was different was how he felt."

Harry rose up on one elbow to look at Draco. "You know what a Dementor feels like?"

"Yeah," said Draco. "I remember when they came on the train. Horrible. Like nothing good will ever happen again."

"But Death wasn't like that at all," said Harry. "He was... peaceful. It was incredible, like all the peace in the world was poured into that one spot where he stood. And just before he left, he let me see him without his cloak."

"Merlin, Potter, was he hideous?"

"No," whispered Harry, still stunned by his memory of that vision. "He was... beautiful, like an angel. He was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Oh," whispered Draco. "Wow."

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The following day, the first thing Harry did was send an owl to Professor McGonagall asking her to check to see if the Elder Wand was still in the vault behind Dumbledore's portrait. If it was not, he felt perfectly safe in assuming that the Resurrection Stone had also vanished from the Forbidden Forest. As soon as Ollie was on his way with the message, he and Draco went to St Mungo's.

Draco was not allowed to stay long with his mother. The Healers were monitoring her very closely. The potion was making her agitated; she was shaking and thrashing weakly in the bed. She still had not regained consciousness, but Healer Pye told them that her movements were a positive sign that the potion was working. They paid a short visit to Lucius, but Draco was clearly too anxious to draw pictures, so Harry suggested they go on to Hogwarts and find out about the Elder Wand.

Professor McGonagall met them in the Entrance Hall, her expression severe and alarmed. Harry guessed at once, from the look on her face, that the wand was gone, and he beamed at her. "It's fine!" he told her, and explained a little of what they had done. "Now we don't ever have to worry about it falling into murderous hands again," he said. She looked so bewildered and relieved, that Harry had to hug her again.

When Ron and Hermione arrived to help with the repair work, Harry was thrilled to be able to tell them the good news. Draco looked pleased that his idea had worked, but he also seemed preoccupied with concern for his mother. When the repair work was finished for the day, Harry took him back to the hospital that afternoon to check on Narcissa's progress. This time they would not allow Draco to come into Narcissa's room. A Healer was sitting with her and told him there was no change.

Ron brought his chess set back to Grimmauld Place from the Burrow that afternoon and set it up on the table in the drawing room. Harry was studying his Auror Handbook; Hermione was reading Draco's Healing books, and neither of them wanted to play chess. Hermione seemed to be as interested in the Healing theories as Draco was, and they sat on the sofa discussing what she was reading. Ron finally talked Draco into playing, and the two were intently engaged in a game for the rest of the evening. Harry hoped the game would distract Draco from worrying. From the look on Ron's face, Draco was giving him some serious competition, but in the end, it was Ron who declared Checkmate.

"I'm sure your mum will be fine," said Harry, gently, once he and Draco were in bed that night.

"I'm not," said Draco, his voice barely audible in the dark room. He turned over, away from Harry. "I don't know what I'm going to do, Potter, if she dies."

Harry had no answer for that. Several things he might say flitted through his mind, but nothing seemed helpful. "I'll stick with you, you know, whatever happens," was what he finally said.

And that might have been the right thing, because he heard Draco's soft sigh, then a very quiet, "Thank you."

He turned over himself, and for a moment simply listened to Draco's hushed breathing in the dark, wondering how he was ever going to get used to sleeping by himself again, if Draco left.

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The Waiting Place was a bleak, rocky shoreline. Towering white-tipped waves crashed in hissing plumes against the slick, dark rocks. It was familiar... Harry knew at once he had been here before... Then his heart leapt into his throat and he remembered. Narcissa Malfoy! Where was she?

The white mist covered the rocky beach like a blanket of gauze, shin-deep, opaque in pockets between the tall rocks. The beach appeared deserted, and no boat tossed upon the water offshore. Harry felt heartsick. Was he too late? He rushed forward, searching, and the shining mist rolled away from his bare feet as he walked. All he could think of was how devastated Malfoy was going to be if his mother died. And how devastated he was going to be himself, if he had done nothing to help, had no last word or vision to bring back to ease Malfoy's grief. It could not be too late...

And then he saw her. Curled up on the ground at the base of one of the tall rocks, she appeared to be little more than part of the mist herself; she was nearly translucent, like a ghost. Heart pounding, Harry knelt at her side. "Mrs Malfoy... Mrs Malfoy," he called. For a moment, he was afraid to touch her, afraid his hand would go right through her, but then he laid his hand tentatively on her shoulder and found he could touch her after all. "Mrs Malfoy!" he called again, and gently shook her. "Narcissa!"

She stirred then, and her face contorted with anger and sorrow. "Leave me alone!" she said in a furious whisper. Her hands came up to cover her tear-stained face. "I can't go back! I can't bear it!"

Harry let go of her and rocked back on his heels. "What?" A sense of outrage mixed with confusion welled up in him. "Why?" he asked. "What can't you bear?" If she said she couldn't stand living after the Malfoy's power and prestige had been stripped away by Voldemort's defeat, he was going to walk away and leave her here. "Answer me," he said, and his voice was no longer so sympathetic.

"Draco," she whispered. "They killed Draco. I know they did. He couldn't use the wand..."

Oh, Merlin! Harry took hold of her wrists and pulled her hands away from her face. "Draco is alive!" he said. "Do you hear me? He's alive and worried sick about you!"

She opened her eyes, and tears poured down her face. "No," she insisted. "I don't believe it. I saw Yaxley go into the house. He said he was going to kill my son... Oh, my son...!" She gasped out a sobbing breath. "I can't bear to go back... if he's dead."

"You can't stay here," said Harry, and he knew this truth with suddenly certainty. "Listen to me!" he said, when she turned her face away. "You're in a coma. You have to either die and move on or you have to go back and live. You have to choose, now. That's why I'm here."

She was silent for a long moment. "I don't want to die..." she whispered.

"That's right," said Harry. "You don't." He took a deep, calming breath, and when he spoke again, his voice was warmer, assertive, and encouraging. "You are Narcissa Malfoy," he said. "You are stronger than this. You spit in the face of the Dark Lord and saved my life right under his nose. Draco is alive and loves you and needs you to come back. And I... I want you to come back, too."

Her eyes had opened again while Harry spoke, and she searched his face intently. "You are telling me the

truth?" she asked. "Yaxley didn't kill my son?"

"I am telling you the truth," said Harry, and a small thrill went through his heart as her colour slowly came flooding back. She no longer looked like a ghost. "Draco is safe. He's been waiting for you to come back. We need you to wake up. Do you think you can do that now?"

She gazed straight into Harry's eyes for a long moment, and Harry saw glimmers of hope replace the earlier despair in her eyes. "Yes," she said, at last. "I believe you. I want to see my son." Harry helped her to her feet, and for a moment more, she clung to him, then she straightened up and lifting her head, stood on her own. "Thank you," she whispered, and she faded away into nothing.

Harry stepped back and looked around. The crashing waves had stilled; the water rested serene and shining on the shore. Where only moments ago it had been dark and chaotic, the atmosphere was now peaceful and filled with light. Harry was amazed and uplifted. And as the white mist swirled in to dissolve it all, Harry heard, as if from far away, a faint, familiar voice calling, "Potter! Potter!"

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"Potter! Wake up!"

The voice was urgent, insistent, and Harry was being shaken. He woke, startled at the darkness of the room after the brightness of his dream. He sat up with a gasp, remembering. Mrs Malfoy!

Draco was on his knees in the middle of the bed, holding one arm up to Harry's face. Around his wrist, the MediAlert bracelet was chiming like a clock and flashing green, then red, then green, then red... The alternating colours illuminated Draco horrified face. "It's my mother," he said, and Harry heard the panic in his voice. "I have to get to St Mungo's!"

Harry reached out and captured Draco's wrist in his hand. "It's okay!" he said. "I think she's okay!"

Draco fought him for a moment, trying to wrench his arm back, but Harry held on. "You don't know that!" Draco shouted. "How can you know that?"

"I just spoke to her!" said Harry. "She was just in my dream!"

Draco's arm went limp in Harry's grasp. "She's dead?" he gasped.

"No!" said Harry, certain of it now. "She didn't go on. She wanted to see you. She wanted to come back." He released Draco's arm. "Go get clothes on," he said. "I'll take you to the hospital. I believe she's waking up."

"Oh!" said Draco. "Bloody hell!" Then he was racing across the hall to his room to get dressed.

Harry rushed to get dressed too, and within moments, Draco was back, shirt unbuttoned, trousers pulled on over his pyjamas but not zipped, his shoes in one hand. He seemed to fling himself at Harry. Arms went around Harry's neck, and then Draco's body was pressed against Harry from knee to ear.

Harry's arms seemed to lift of their own accord to encircle Malfoy in a hug. And for the barest of instants, time seemed to stand still, and Harry held Draco in his arms and felt something slip and settle and soar inside his heart, something like a missing piece sliding irrevocably and oh so surely into place, suddenly whole.

"Go!" whispered Draco.

And Harry Disapparated, taking them both directly to the waiting room on the fourth floor.

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A little old witch in the waiting room let out a shriek when they Apparated into the room. "Sorry!" yelled Harry, but then he and Draco were running for the door to the ward. Harry knew they must look like wild men, with their clothes half-on and hair all crazy, and it never even occurred to him to stay in the waiting room and let Draco go in alone. It must not have occurred to Draco either, because he had Harry by the wrist and was dragging him along. They skidded to a stop outside Narcissa's door. Healer Pye was in the room and he was running diagnostic spells, but he was standing by the bed and Harry couldn't see Mrs Malfoy at all. Draco looked like he was suddenly afraid to go into the room, so Harry got behind him and gave him a little shove. Harry got a scowl for his trouble, but Draco went in.

"Healer Pye," said Draco, and Harry heard a quaver in his voice. "My bracelet went off. Is she okay? May we come in?"

Healer Pye turned around and beamed at Draco. "She's going to be fine. The potion did the trick! Come in!"

"Draco? Draco!" Healer Pye stepped aside and there was Narcissa Malfoy, looking very pale and worn, but sitting up. The relief in her eyes when she saw Draco was immense. Draco was at her side in a moment, sitting on the bed, and she threw her arms around his neck. "I was so sure you were dead..." she said on a sob.

"No, I'm fine, Mother," said Draco, "but it was a near thing. If it hadn't been for Potter..."

She pulled back from Draco's hug to look into his face. "Potter? Harry Potter? That's so strange. I remember something..." Then she glanced up and saw Harry standing in the doorway, and she looked shocked. "Was that real?" she whispered. "I dreamed..."

"It was real. He saw you in a dream, Mother," said Draco. "He and his house-elf - you remember Kreacher, don't you? - caught the Death Eaters that were attacking us."

Narcissa glanced back at Harry. She looked a little frightened. "Mr Potter, it seems we are in your debt..."

"No," said Harry, still standing in the doorway. "There's no debt. And Malfoy is leaving out the most important part. That he saved your life, not me. He was defending you very well when I got there. All I did was Stun them and alert the Aurors."

She turned back to Draco. "You fought them? But I thought your wand wasn't working."

Draco shrugged. "It wasn't, until I got outside and saw what they were doing to you. I was so angry and desperate for it to work; I tried to use it as hard as I could. It sparked a little and then it did work. It still doesn't work exactly right, but it was better that night."

Harry made a mental note to ask Malfoy about that later.

Narcissa was looking at Draco intently and her face was very pale. She reached out and took his hand. "What about your father?" she asked, her voice broken.

"Malfoy," Harry interrupted quietly. "I'm going to go sit in the waiting room until you're ready to go."

"Mr Potter..." Narcissa Malfoy's voice stopped him and he turned back. "Thank you."

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They didn't stay much longer at the hospital. Healer Pye shooed Draco out, saying his mother needed to rest and sleep, that they could visit her again in the morning, that it would be a couple of days before she regained her strength enough to be released.

Harry stood up from his seat on the tattered sofa when Draco came back into the waiting room smiling, the worry of the last two weeks erased from his face. "I'm glad she's all right," said Harry.

"I told her about father and that I'm staying with you. I told her that Yaxley hasn't been caught and that we can't go home yet." He seemed to trip over the last couple of words he said, and then he sank down to sit on the sofa. "I... don't think I can go back there, after all that's happened," he said, his voice hushed. "Even if Mother is well." He looked up at Harry, dismayed. "But she can't stay there alone."

"We can talk to Andromeda," said Harry. "I'm sure she'll want to help."

Draco nodded. "I did tell Mother about Aunt Andromeda and Teddy. I'm not sure what she thought of it. Healer Pye came in just then and I had to leave."

"Right," said Harry. "Then we'll find out in the morning, okay. Are you ready to go?"

Draco took a deep breath, then stood up and took Harry's arm. "Ready," he said.

Harry Disapparated and took them back to the bedroom at Grimmauld Place. The door to his room was standing wide open and the gas lamp in the hall was lit. Harry didn't think the light had been on when they'd left, so he went downstairs to check. He found Ron and Hermione waiting nervously in the drawing room.

"Oh, Harry, what happened," said Hermione. "We heard yelling and running. And when we came upstairs you were gone."

"Malfoy's bracelet went off," said Harry. "His mother woke up. Everything's all right, you can go back to bed."

"But that's wonderful," said Hermione. "She's going to be okay?"

"She is," said Harry. "The potion worked."

"Does that mean he'll be going home, now?" asked Ron. He sounded sleepy and very hopeful.

He is home, thought Harry. A sharp ache ran through his heart at the thought of Draco leaving. "No, at least not until they find Yaxley," he said aloud. "The Manor still isn't safe. But I dunno. I think he may stay here, even after that."

Ron sighed, but Hermione smiled. "I'm actually glad," she said.

"You just like having someone to argue magical theories with," said Ron, but he was smiling fondly back at her.

"Yes, well it's not like either of you ever wanted to," she said. "But if he leaves..."

Ron and Harry exchanged a look. "I've changed my mind," said Ron. "He can stay." Then he paused and frowned at Harry. "You don't have to tell him I said that..."

Harry shook his head, amused. "I'm going back to bed," he said.

They all went upstairs and Harry continued on up to the third floor. He put out the lamp in the hall and tiptoed into the bedroom. He'd expected Draco to be already asleep, but he wasn't.

Harry got into bed and turned over to face Draco. "All right, Malfoy?" he asked softly. "I thought you'd be asleep."

"No," said Draco. "I wanted to hear your dream. When I woke you up, you said my mother had been in

your dream."

"It was strange," said Harry. "I recognised the place from the first time I saw her, but I couldn't find her at first." Harry went on to tell Draco all of the dream. "She stood up finally and said she wanted to see you. Then she disappeared," he ended. "That's when you woke me up."

Draco was quiet for a long time. "I think you saved her, not the potion," he said. "The potion may have taken her as far as that place where you found her, but it was you that made her choose to come back."

Harry was watching Draco's face as he talked. Even in the dark room with only the moonlight for light, Harry could tell that Draco was struggling with some intense emotion.

"Merlin, Potter. What if you hadn't had that dream?" Draco asked. "What if you'd given them up when you had the chance?"

"I dunno," said Harry. "I think the potion might have got through to her eventually."

"No, I don't think I can believe that," said Draco. "I... Thank you, Potter. I really can't thank you enough, this time."

"It's fine," said Harry, his face going warm, and though he didn't want to let on, he was very, very touched by Draco's words. They were silent for a long moment, and then Harry remembered what Draco had said about his wand. "I heard you tell your mother that your wand worked better when you fought the Death Eaters at the Manor. Was it worse than it is now, before that?"

"When I first got home with it, I couldn't do much with it at all," said Draco, with a yawn. "That's why I was afraid to Apparate. I was sure I'd be Splinched. I still don't trust it enough for that. But it did improve during the fight."

"Hmm," said Harry, thinking hard. "Do you suppose it's choosing you again, but just not all at once?

Maybe in stages?"

Draco sighed. "Maybe. I'm too tired to think about it, Potter. It's the middle of the night."

"Sorry," said Harry. "Go to sleep. We've got to be up early to go back and visit your mother, yeah?"

"Yeah," said Draco, already sounding half-asleep. "We'll have to get Father to draw a picture for her."

Harry groaned and turned over. "Oh, right," he said. "I can hardly wait."

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The following day went by in a blur. Harry and Draco spent most of the morning at St Mungo's. Harry met Andromeda in the waiting room when she arrived that morning and he explained what had happened during the night. He took Teddy so that she could go meet her sister alone. Draco came out a few minutes later and assured Harry that his Mother had been glad and relieved to see her sister again.

Andromeda offered to take Narcissa in when she was released from the hospital since it still wasn't safe to return to the Manor. Draco protested at first, but Andromeda was adamant that she had years to make up for with her sister and wanted to do it, and in the end, Draco very gratefully accepted. Harry had been immensely relieved. Having Draco stay with him was one thing, but he couldn't imagine Narcissa Malfoy living in his house.

Draco took his mother down the hall to see Lucius. Later Harry saw the picture that Narcissa hung in her room: three people with yellow hair standing in a stripe of green grass under a stripe of blue sky with a fat pinwheel of a sun blazing in the corner of the page. The three people in the picture were all holding hands and it made Harry smile. Somehow, out of all the pain they'd been through, there was this bright hopeful picture.

Harry and Draco worked at Hogwarts that afternoon, and after dinner that evening, they read their books in the drawing room. Hermione was still reading Draco's first year Healer texts. Harry tried playing chess with Ron but he didn't stand a chance. His king was captured in a very short time, so he went back to studying his Auror Handbook and let Draco play. This time, Draco won and Harry was secretly glad.

All throughout the day, though, Harry caught himself looking up from whatever he was doing to watch Draco. After a moment, Draco always seemed to feel Harry's gaze and look up to meet his eyes. Sometimes, it was Harry who looked up to find Draco already watching him. And there was something now in the light grey eyes that Harry couldn't define, that sent small electric thrill shivers through him when their eyes met.

When they finally went to bed that night, the air between them felt heavy with a vibrating, suspenseful intensity. Harry felt acutely aware of Draco's presence, that he was lying very close, though not touching, and not talking as he usually did. The room was silent and tense, dark and filled with moonlight. Gradually, as the silence stretched out, Harry relaxed. He had finally started to drift off when the whisper came out of the darkness.

"Potter?"

Half asleep, Harry hummed softly in answer.

"Ever done it with a guy?"

Harry, sleep muddled, almost asked ever done what? but suddenly acute awareness of Draco's closeness here in his bed made his face heat with understanding and he jolted awake.

"No," he whispered. There was a long moment of silence. Harry swallowed, his throat tight. "I've never done it with anyone, Malfoy."

Fingers slid across the inside of his wrist, feather-light: a challenge - or an invitation. Then Draco's hand

lay warm and alarming on Harry's forearm. Harry remembered vividly how it had felt when he'd held Draco in his arms and an involuntary thrill raced through him.

"Have you?" whispered Harry, his voice gone.

"Maybe."

There was a smug mysteriousness in Draco's voice that made Harry grin in spite of himself. "Maybe?" he laughed, his equilibrium restored by this teasing. "You mean you don't know?"

Draco rose up on one elbow and leaned over to look down at Harry, one pale eyebrow arched. "Of course I know," he said. "I just don't want to tell."

"Er . . . if you did it with Crabbe or Goyle," replied Harry as an inner shudder of revulsion went through him, "I don't want you to tell either."

"Oh, please, Potter," said Draco with a soft snort. "Give me a little credit for taste." Then his eyes turned solemn. "Some things are meant to stay private."

So this was just talk, thought Harry, relieved that he'd misunderstood. But then Draco moved closer, his fingers sliding in a slow caress up Harry's arm, and Harry realised that he hadn't misunderstood at all.

"You can't be serious," whispered Harry, his voice catching in his throat again. He saw Draco's teeth flash white in the moonlight, a quick smile.

"It's okay. No one has to know," whispered Draco back, his fingers continuing their slow shocking progress up to Harry's shoulder. He paused, moved closer. "Just this once," he added softly, entreaty plain in his tone of voice. "I want to..." He drew in a breath. "And I've seen how you watch me. I think you want to, as much as I do."

When Draco's fingers brushed across his throat, Harry felt the shiver, whether it was in himself, or in Draco he couldn't tell, but then Draco's face was inches from his own, warm breath ghosting over his cheek. Harry opened his mouth to reply but could think of nothing to say. The truth of Draco's last statement was reeling through his mind, leaving him defenceless against the onslaught of curiosity and desire that was welling up in him.

"Just tell me to stop," whispered Draco, "and I will."

Harry moved then, his arms slipping around Draco's bare back to pull him down. "I don't want you to stop," Harry breathed.

Draco's face hovered above Harry's for a heartbeat before he lowered his head and tentatively touched his mouth to Harry's. Draco's lips were surprisingly soft. Never in his life had Harry imagined kissing Draco Malfoy, but he knew if he ever had considered it, he would never have imagined this. Not this ruthless, seductive gentleness.

Draco drew back, and their eyes met, gauging each other's reaction; the question again? and the answer yes! somehow exchanged unspoken between one breath and the next in that momentary glance. Harry's arms tightened around Draco, one hand coming up to tangle in hair that slid through his fingers like silk, as Draco's mouth found his a second time. They kissed again, long and slow.

Fleetingly, Harry thought that if kissing Ginny for the first time had felt like many sunny days, then kissing Malfoy now felt like endless nights full of sharp, white moonlight and deep, intriguing shadows; contrasts keen as a knife blade - sweet intoxicating sensations mixed with mysterious unexplored possibilities. Then all thoughts of Ginny were swept from his mind as Draco rose up and moved over to straddle Harry's hips. Desire flared, visceral and elemental between them, raw and very real. For a moment, they just held on, clinging to each other, hearts pounding, panting breath warm and shared.

A myriad of thoughts and emotions whirled through Harry's mind. No one had ever kissed him like that before. Realisation was absolutely thrumming through him, with each pounding pulse of his heart, that this, this, was what he wanted. He had no idea how long he'd wanted Malfoy - if it was only since just a few seconds ago or since forever, but he was sure. He wanted this now, had always longed for this intensity of feeling. Passion was building like heat lightning in his veins, waiting to explode, and then...

then there was something... an elusive, shifting memory resurfacing... a reason he should stop... But he didn't want to stop and Draco was pressing kisses down his neck to the hollow of his throat and he couldn't think clearly.

Draco's hand slipped between them, skirting the edge of Harry's boxers, tugging the waistband down. Harry caught Draco's wrist, his clouded memory jogged. "Wait," he breathed. Ginny, he thought. Oh, Merlin. But being with Ginny had never felt like this. She had been a steadying comforting idea he could cling to in the midst of all the chaos, a bright dream in the darkness that had surrounded him. A dream that had faded in the end into confusion and uncertainty. Her mere touch had never done to him what Draco's was doing to him now.

"Don't worry, Potter," whispered Draco, his mouth at Harry's ear. "This doesn't have to mean anything. In the morning, you can forget it ever happened."

A brief flash of disappointment ran through Harry - how could this not mean anything? But then Draco deftly twisted his wrist out of Harry's grasp and Harry was lost to all coherent thought.

Harry never knew when the aching loneliness he'd always felt inside him eased, coaxed away by the touch of strong, warm hands and the heart-catch of shy, unexpected smiles. Harry made love back, touching gently but surely, taking his time, delighting in finding places and ways of touching that made Draco moan and gasp softly and arch against the pillows. It was sweet to lose himself in Draco; to let reason slip away to be engulfed in the shared heat of what Draco could do to him, what he could do to Draco.

Then time seemed to pause, spun out and suspended in the moonlight, held forever like one endless indrawn breath until Harry felt as if he slipped over the edge of the universe, his bones turned to liquid fire. Draco held him close and he held Draco, passion weaving them together into one inarticulate cry of completion, bodies arching as one.

Then Harry, spent and sated, laid his head in the hollow of Draco's shoulder and simply held on, his heart pounding in his ears. His lips brushed across the fair, damp skin at Draco's throat. Draco shifted slightly, settling more comfortably under Harry's weight, hands sliding down to rest lightly at the base of Harry's spine.

For a moment Harry hesitated, and then said the words his heart had spoken in that fiery moment of release. "I don't want to let you go."

Harry's words wove a sudden delicate hush into the air, like a breath caught and held in anticipation. Neither of them moved for a moment. Then Draco's hands trailed up Harry's bare back with a tentative shivery gentleness, so different from their earlier urgency. "This doesn't mean anything," he said quietly, ritually, his fingers drawing slow circles and lines of secret fire between Harry's shoulder blades. "Tomorrow, you can pretend it never happened. I don't care."

But Draco's touch spoke with a silent burning eloquence and told a different tale. Harry closed his eyes, lost for a moment in the unspoken message of Draco's hands; sparks of truth laid down by each fingertip branded his skin invisibly, indelibly, sinking into bone, igniting in revelation. "Yes, you do," breathed Harry, daring to put words to that soft, exquisite touch.

The fingers stilled, silence stretched, waited, barely breathing. Draco turned his face into Harry's hair. "You shouldn't... care about me..." A whisper, barely heard, holding a question barely asked.

"I know," whispered Harry back. But I do, he thought, and caught up as he was in marvelling that such a thing could be true, he didn't realise he'd not said it out loud, nor did he hear the wistful question in Draco's voice which his unspoken words left unanswered.

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Harry woke alone the next morning. He lay for a moment, still half-asleep, missing Draco's warm comforting presence. Then with a flash that jolted him fully awake, he remembered what he and Draco had done. A second later, he remembered Ginny and a wave of panic and dismay seized him. Had he, in the heat of passion, acted like an utter fool? Had he completely ruined any chance he had to get back with Ginny? The magnitude of all he had thrown so carelessly away last night, seemed to loom huge and heartbreaking in the morning light.

He'd always wanted a family, a home, children, and he'd begun to envision having those things with Ginny. If he lost Ginny, he lost all those hopes too. He spent a long moment grappling with the pain of accepting that loss. He could no longer delude himself, though; he had to acknowledge that the Ginny of his imagination and the real-life Ginny were not the same. All of it, said the relentless voice in his head, all the hopes and dreams that he'd clung to during the last year were just that - a fantasy, something he'd made up. They were only a wish he'd wished out of loneliness, a dream that had never been based on reality.

But what moment of insanity had inspired him to latch onto Draco Malfoy instead? If he looked at things rationally, Malfoy was a risk. Harry had no idea how the future would unfold for them, or how long they would last. It would most certainly be difficult to explain to his friends, and might even cause a rift with the Weasleys, which Harry most definitely didn't want. But his heart told him now that what he'd shared with Draco last night was very real. It had felt... right. Profoundly right. It had satisfied the deep longing he'd carried inside him for what seemed like ages. So he stood now, he felt, at the brink of a life-changing choice. He could follow his head and do the expected thing; he could continue to try to work things out with Ginny, have the home, the children...

Harry gave a soft snort of a laugh to himself. The thought of that just now had made him cringe. He didn't want that. Oh, he did want children and there was a pang in his heart at the thought of giving that up, but this morning he could no longer imagine himself with Ginny. His heart had found what it wanted, and had already made its choice.

So there was no going back. His life and Malfoy's had suddenly become entangled past undoing. Well, maybe not so suddenly, Harry thought. Looking back, he could see that their lives had always been tightly intertwined. Malfoy had even been the first person his age he had met in the Wizarding world. Maybe this was simply the next step in a long sequence of events that had held them in an inescapable relationship with each other all along.

Harry smiled. It seemed he could no longer delay accepting that risk - that infuriating, fascinating, challenging, and beginning-to-be very dear risk that was Draco Malfoy in his life.

He sat up on the edge of the bed, his hand going automatically to his glasses on the bedside table, and then one more startling thought occurred to him. He remembered Teddy. And the pain he'd felt at the idea of never having children eased significantly. He recalled how he'd watched Draco smiling at the baby. Teddy was his and Draco's together in a way that Teddy would never have belonged to him with Ginny, and a light, joyous feeling rose up in his heart. And he suddenly wanted Draco back in his arms,

wanted to kiss him again this morning and see how that felt.

He dressed hurriedly and ran down the four flights of stairs to the kitchen. Draco might have said they could forget what happened, but Harry didn't believe that was what Draco really wanted. And Harry was determined now that that was not going to be the case.

He found Draco alone in the kitchen, standing by the table staring into the cup of tea he held in his hands. Breakfast for everyone was already on the table, stacks of toast and plates of bacon and sausages and eggs.

"Malfoy . . ." said Harry softly. Draco glanced up at him and quickly looked away. Harry took a deep breath and tried again. "Draco." The name felt odd and unfamiliar, and intensely intimate coming from his mouth, and Harry felt the heat rise in his face.

Draco looked up again, his eyes narrowed, studying Harry carefully. "I told you," he said after a moment. "It didn't mean anything." He waved his hand, a small dismissive movement. "You don't have to pretend that it did."

"I know what you said," replied Harry, resolutely forging on with what he intended to say even while knowing and hating that fact that his face was probably going bright scarlet. He walked across the room to stand close to Draco. "But it's not true. No pretending, remember?"

Draco shrugged and took a sudden interest in the contents of his teacup. "You didn't say that last night," he said, barely louder than a whisper.

"I'm saying it now," said Harry, very softly. "Last night... meant a lot to me." It was not the most eloquent of declarations but it was as sincere as Harry could make it. "And I've realised it's not Ginny I want to be with. It's you." Draco looked up and searched Harry's eyes for a moment, unconvinced. Then a faint pink blush crept into his face and he turned away, but Harry saw the swift smile he'd tried to hide. And just as swiftly, Harry caught his arm and turned him back. The smile was a revelation. Harry smiled back.

Draco touched Harry's arm, fingers running slowly up the sleeve of Harry's jumper to the shoulder. He

stood very still, head tilted slightly, a bemused expression suffusing his face as if this was too impossible to be real, that Harry allowed this blatant touch; his touch, there in the kitchen in broad daylight.

Their eyes met, and a thrill of daring sparked between them, challenging each other to risk more than this touch. Harry took Draco's teacup and set it on the table, then leaned in and kissed him. In the light of day, even in the ordinariness of the kitchen, it felt just as good, just as wonderful, as it had last night.

"Someone could walk in any minute," murmured Draco, his arms going around Harry's neck.

"I don't care," said Harry, pulling him closer and kissing him again.

This time, after the kiss ended, Draco's smile was dazzling. It completely transfigured his face into something breathtaking and Harry found himself smiling back, his heart captivated. For a split second, he was intensely conscious that he was, indeed, definitely and inexplicably, falling for this intriguing, prickly prat.

Footsteps sounded suddenly on the stairs and Draco pulled away. Draco sat down at the table just before Ron came into the kitchen. Harry could tell that Draco was trying hard to school his features into a more Ron-appropriate expression as Ron walked across the room towards them. The fact that he was failing miserably made Harry light-hearted and he laughed.

"What are you two up to now," asked Ron, suddenly suspicious.

"Nothing you need to worry about," said Harry, grinning. He sat in the chair next to Draco and snatched a good portion of the stack of toast onto his plate before Ron could get to it.

"Oh, right," said Ron, looking from Harry to Draco and back again. "Why does that make me more worried than ever?"

Draco smirked at Ron, and it wasn't a sneering kind of smirk. It was more like he'd done something

brilliant and knew it, something amazing like catching the Snitch in the final of the Quidditch World Cup. Draco looked happy, and that was so new, so incredible, that Harry laughed again.

Draco turned back to Harry and their eyes met. Harry couldn't look away. He was sure he was smiling foolishly but he couldn't help it. Draco's expression wasn't much better.

Harry heard a moan from across the table. "Oh no, tell me you didn't!" gasped Ron. "Bloody hell!"

"OW!" Harry yelped. Ron's foot had connected sharply with his shin under the table.

"Please, tell me you're not shagging him," said Ron, furiously. "Harry, have you gone mad?" Then his face went so red his freckles stood out like pale spots on his face. "And what about Ginny?" he said, turning his glare from Harry to Draco. "You can't seriously be thinking of breaking up with her for this... this..."

"Slimy git?" supplied Draco. He was still smirking.

"Stop," said Harry, quietly but firmly. He quit rubbing his sore shin and faced Ron across the table. "I'm sorry, Ron," said Harry. "I didn't mean for you to find out quite like this." He took a deep breath. "You don't have to worry about me breaking up with Ginny because we never got back together. But I'll tell her. I want her to hear this from me."

Hermione suddenly appeared, sitting down next to Ron. No one had heard her come down the stairs. She looked around at all their faces one by one. Then she got that funny little knowing smile she got when she had figured something out.

"Harry's shagging Malfoy," said Ron in a tone that sounded like he was announcing the end of the world.

"I see that," said Hermione, giving Harry a quick grin. "And I heard what you said about Ginny." Then she turned to Draco. "Malfoy," she said, her expression turning deadly serious. "I know forty-seven ways to inflict pain with my wand and not all of them are spells. Hurt Harry and I promise you will find out about

every single one of them. The hard way."

Draco nodded back. His eyebrows had disappeared under his fringe. "Duly noted," he said.

Ron was boggling at her. "Forty-seven," he said, incredulously. "That's all you could come up with? Forty-seven?"

"If you want to count poking his eyes out, it could be forty-eight," she said.

Ron groaned and dropped his head into his hands. "I definitely want to count that," he muttered.

"Nice," said Draco very quietly, frowning at them. "And what will you do if he hurts me?"

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Harry met Hermione's eyes across the table and saw her face go pink. He turned to Draco who was now sitting up straight, his chin up, looking back at Ron and Hermione with calm defiance, standing up for himself in the face of this seemingly solid front of opposition. Sirius flashed into Harry's mind, and the admiration he'd always felt for his godfather's resolute adherence to his own principles as the lone Gryffindor in a family of Slytherins rose up and spilled over into his feelings for Malfoy. Harry's heart did that warm little flip again, turning over with a rush of affection.

"I'm sorry, Malfoy," said Hermione. "That wasn't fair. And now that you've mentioned it, I believe I would care if he hurt you, too. So..." She cleared her throat and fixed Harry with a steely eye. "Harry, I know forty-eight ways to inflict pain with my wand. Don't give me a reason to use them on you, either!"

Harry laughed, but he knew she was serious. "I won't," he said, and she smiled at him. Then she elbowed Ron in the ribs.

"Oi!" said Ron, and he jerked his head up out of his hands. He glanced at Hermione and sighed. "Must I?" he said, and then turned to eye Malfoy across the table. They exchanged a very prolonged intense stare,

like cats facing off with arched backs and bristling fur.

Hermione drew her wand and thwacked Ron on the head with it. "I have no objection to using this on you, too," she said.

"Ow!" Ron's eyebrows flew up and for a second, he looked absolutely and truly horrified. "Merlin's pants, Hermione!" he exclaimed. "You wouldn't!"

"Try me," she said. The steely look was back in her eyes.

Ron turned back to Draco, but the tension of a moment ago was broken. Draco looked like he was trying hard not to laugh. Harry had barely stifled a snigger.

Ron took a deep breath. Then he surprised them all by extending his hand out over the table to Draco. "If you're with Harry," he said, "then I guess that means you're with me..." He glanced at Hermione again and she nodded. "...with us, too."

It took a second for Draco to react. He looked a little gobsmacked, but he took Ron's hand. They shook once, and Harry held his breath for a moment, waiting for the universe to explode...

"Can we eat now?" said Ron. Harry let his breath out in a soft laugh. Evidently, it wasn't the end of the world after all.

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After breakfast, after Ron and Hermione had gone back upstairs, Harry sat at the kitchen table with Draco, knowing that somehow, while they'd been eating, something had crept up between them and was not right. Despite that brilliant, shining moment, before Ron had come down the stairs, when

everything had seemed perfect, it was not. Draco was no longer smiling, and Harry kept mulling over something that Draco had said earlier, something that bothered him, and he was trying to work out how to ask about it.

Draco, too, seemed lost in his own thoughts, staring down into his teacup. After a long moment of silence, he pushed the empty cup away and turned to gaze pensively at Harry. "You don't actually have to do it, you know," he said, softly.

"Do what?" asked Harry, unsettled by the doubts he saw now in the light grey eyes, eyes that only a short time ago had blazed with warmth and certainty.

"Tell her," said Draco. "You don't have to tell Ginevra Weasley, who you've been pining for, for months, what happened last night." He looked down, his eyes fixed on the top of the table. "I wasn't expecting that from you. I wasn't expecting it to mean anything to you." His voice trailed off and then he looked back up, an expression of unhappy determination on his face. "You shouldn't ruin your chances with her because of me," he said.

It was a long moment before Harry could take all of that in and respond. For a few seconds, he actually thought Malfoy was being noble, but another second's reflection told him no, that didn't fit. Noble acts of self-sacrifice weren't exactly in Malfoy's emotional repertoire. Harry searched Draco's face, trying to see through the camouflage, the pretence of Draco's uncharacteristic selflessness, to understand the unspoken meaning behind Draco's words. And then he thought he knew. Not self-sacrifice. Self-preservation.

"Draco, what are you afraid of?" asked Harry quietly.

Draco's eyes widened in surprise for a second, and a tint of colour washed across his cheekbones. "I'm not..." he started.

"No pretending," said Harry, frowning.

"I'm not pretending. I'm trying to be realistic."

"How is it realistic to keep insisting that this doesn't mean anything, when it obviously does?" This was what had continued to bother Harry. This was what he'd wanted to ask about earlier.

"I was reminding myself that it might not mean anything to you," said Draco. He paused and took a deep breath. "I wanted last night more than anything," he said. "But Granger with her funny little wand threats made me see that nothing would ever help me pick up the pieces if we start this now... and then you change your mind. So yes, if I'm afraid, it's that you'll eventually realise you've made a mistake. You'll go back to Weasley and I'll be left shattered."

"Okay, then," said Harry. "That's fair. I know this is a risk - for both of us. But I spent a long time this morning thinking about that and making a decision about what I wanted. If I tell you now that I'm very sure it isn't Ginny, will you believe me?"

"She's all you've thought about since I've been here," said Draco, but a small smile was creeping up in the corners of his mouth. "I know you were thinking about her last night. What makes you so sure this morning?" He was looking at Harry now, his eyes hopeful and expectant.

Harry gave a little laugh. "I wasn't thinking of her for long last night," he said. "And I promise you, that if I still wanted to be with her, then what we did last night wouldn't have happened." He reached out to slide his hand around Draco's neck, and pull him closer. "As for what makes me so sure this morning, it's this..." He leaned in and kissed Draco with all the certainty and desire he had in his heart.

Draco's hands came up to cradle his face, and Harry was lost for a long moment in the sweet, astonishingly perfect rightness of kissing Draco Malfoy. "Kissing Ginny Weasley," he said, pulling back just enough to speak, "never felt like that."

Their eyes met and Draco was smiling again, and Harry saw the warmth and belief in Draco's eyes and he smiled back.

"I don't know," said Draco, amusement in his voice. "I might need more convincing..." He pulled Harry

back into another slow ardent kiss.

Somewhere in the distance, Harry heard footsteps on the stairs and Ron calling his name, but he didn't care. Somewhere in the distance, he heard a strangled gasp and a horrified, retching groan and then muttering as footsteps went back up the stairs. He pulled out of the kiss because he had to laugh.

"I think we just gave Ron a rather nasty shock," said Harry, grinning.

"I think I've been waiting for this moment since I was eleven," said Draco, grinning back. "That was perfect."

Footsteps sounded again on the stairs and this time it was Hermione. "Ron's upstairs saying he's never going to be able to eat in here again." She gave them a wide grin. "Anyway, we're off to Hogwarts to work this morning. We'll see you there later."

"Yeah," said Harry. "We'll be there after we visit St Mungo's."

Before they left for the hospital, Harry wrote a note to Ginny saying that he had something important to tell her, and asking if he could visit her that afternoon. He sent the note with Ollie, then he Apparated with Draco to visit Narcissa.

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Ollie was waiting for Harry when they all returned home for lunch. Ginny's reply said she would be glad to meet with him if he could come soon. Harry grabbed a sandwich from Kreacher in the kitchen and with a quick kiss and a whispered "Good luck," from Draco, went out the front door to Apparate to the Burrow with one of the Aurors.

When Harry arrived at the Burrow, Ginny was waiting for him wearing her Quidditch practice gear. "I can't talk long," she said as she led him through the house and out the back door. "I had already made plans when I got your owl. Ollie's such a sweetheart..." She took Harry to sit on the bench at the foot of the garden again. "No one can eavesdrop on us out here," she said. "Mum's visiting Auntie Muriel, but you never know who might be sneaking around." She flashed Harry a quick grin, then sobered. "I have something to tell you, too."

"Okay," said Harry, curious and feeling like he'd been handed a momentary reprieve. "You first, then."

"I've found out that the Holyhead Harpies are looking for a back-up Seeker," she said without preamble. "I'm going to try out for it. If I get it, I'm not going back to school." She sounded determined and a little defiant. "Mum will have a fit, of course, and blame George for being a bad example, but it's what I love. It's what I want to do more than anything." She looked up at Harry now and there was a pleading look in her light brown eyes. "I'm hoping you can understand that. I hoping that you'll back me up this time with Mum."

It took Harry a moment to wrap his mind around all the implications of Ginny's announcement. His first thought was relief, that this might mean she was ending things between them herself, that she wouldn't be as hurt by his news as he'd feared. Also, he knew he'd let her down before by not standing up for her with Molly, and though he hated to be pulled into the middle of a conflict between them, he was not going to refuse to support her again.

"If I don't get the position," Ginny went on, still looking hopefully at Harry, "it will just be our secret, okay? I'll go back to school and Mum doesn't have to know."

"Okay," said Harry. "If you get it, I'll talk to Molly. And if you don't, I won't tell anyone." Then he grinned. "But you'll be great!" he said, and meant it. "I wish you the best of luck!"

She beamed at him and put her arms around his neck. "Thank you!" she whispered.

She laid her head on his shoulder and he put his arm loosely around her because this was still Ginny and he still cared, but he was suddenly acutely aware that it wasn't the same any more. He felt a small ache

in his chest for that loss.

Ginny straightened up after a moment, tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked at him expectantly. "Okay," she said. "Now you. What did you want to tell me?"

Harry hesitated, uncertain again where they stood with each other, if they were together or not, and how hurt she was going to be when she found out what he'd done.

"Harry," she insisted softly. "Tell me."

He hesitated again. "It isn't something you'll want to hear," he said finally.

She took a deep slow breath. Harry felt her shift away from him slightly before she spoke again. "Tell me anyway," she said. "It sounds like something I need to know."

"It is," he said. Suddenly, faced with having to tell her this, he was deeply reluctant. Technically, they'd been broken up all year, and he thought they still were, but he couldn't escape the feeling that even so, he had violently betrayed her trust. It was going to be so hard to tell her that -

"You don't have to protect me," Ginny said quietly, breaking into his thoughts as if she could read his mind. "I would rather know the truth - whatever it is."

With a sigh, Harry nodded. "I know. I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't want to hurt you. I don't quite know how it happened. But I..." He paused, and swallowed at the lump in his throat, and then the words tumbled out in a whispered rush, like a dam breaking. "I'm involved with someone else."

She drew away from him. "Who?"

"Draco," said Harry.

"Draco," repeated Ginny, confusion sounding in the barely audible word. "Malfoy?"

"Yes," said Harry. "He's been living with me since Death Eaters attacked him and his parents right after the battle at Hogwarts. His parents were seriously injured and I'm helping him with them. He's helping me with restoring my house. We've talked a lot... and forgiven a lot. The rest just happened."

He watched her brown eyes shift through surprise and protest and reproach to realisation. She drew in a sharp breath and Harry knew she'd understood everything he hadn't said. "And you believe you can trust him now?" she asked. "You believe he actually cares about you?"

"I'm sure of it."

"But what about his parents? How can you help them, Harry, after everything they did to hurt us?"

"I don't expect you to understand about his father after what Lucius did to you," said Harry. "I was too angry at first to agree to help him, too. But he was completely Obliviated, Gin. He has no memory at all." Harry explained a little about what they hoped to do, and how the Healers thought Lucius's memories might be altered. "But his mother saved my life," he told her. "I wanted to help her and I'm glad she's going to be okay."

Ginny seemed to consider all he told her carefully. "I think the most important question is if being with him makes you happy, Harry."

"Yeah," said Harry. "Surprisingly, it does. When we're not fighting," he added with a wry smile. "But we're working on that."

"I can't even imagine it," she said with a snort of a laugh. "I guess I'll have to see it to believe it." Then she frowned and poked Harry in the chest with one finger. "But you tell Malfoy that if he steps one toe

out of line, I'll find him and hurt him," she said, her face fiercely protective.

"Hermione has already threatened him sufficiently," said Harry laughing. "But that's good to know."

"All right, then," said Ginny with a smile and a decisive nod. Then she sighed and laid her hand on Harry's arm. "It really is over between us, isn't it?" she asked softly.

Affection and admiration for her rose up inside him and he drew her back into his arms for a hug. He remembered how he'd always loved the way she fit under his chin, and it was strange now to realise that the fit seemed odd and inadequate. But he did still care for her - would always care for her. "I am sorry we didn't work out, Gin," he whispered into her hair, breathing in that sweet, flowery scent he'd always loved for perhaps the last time. Then he let her go. "We're still okay, though, yeah? As friends?" he asked. "I don't want to lose you completely."

"We're good," she said, and though her voice quivered a little, her eyes were shining and sure. "We're family, Harry. That's forever."

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When Harry returned from the Burrow, he found Draco and Hermione sitting on the sofa in the drawing room studying Draco's Healing textbooks. Ron, he noted with amusement, had set up his chessboard and was watching Hermione and Draco with a mixture of abject boredom and longing on his face, obviously still waiting for Draco to finish talking to Hermione and play another game with him. It made Harry intensely glad to see that his friends had not only accepted Draco's company here, but actually seemed to be enjoying it as well.

"This is fascinating," Hermione was saying. "I'd never realised how much research went into these Healing theories and spells."

They all looked up as Harry walked into the room. Ollie gave an excited twitter and bobbed at Harry, so

he walked over to the owl and stroked his head. Harry was aware that they were all watching him, intently curious to know what had happened at the Burrow.

Ron stood up, frowning in concern. "All right, Harry?" he asked. "Is Ginny all right?"

Harry tried to look serious, but seeing them all there getting along so well, coupled with the relief he felt over his talk with Ginny, meant that he couldn't keep up the pretence more than a couple of seconds. He looked up from Ollie and grinned.

Harry's gaze had gone straight to Draco and their eyes met for a moment. Draco gave him a brilliant smile and a satisfied nod.

"More than all right," said Harry, turning to Ron. "It's okay. She's fine. She said we're family, and we're both very happy to leave things at that." He wondered if Ron would approve of what his sister was up to at this very moment, but he would keep her secret.

Ron sighed. "All right, then," he said. "But, you know I was just getting used to the idea of you and her, and now..." He sank back into his chair, waving his hand helplessly in Draco's direction, evidently overcome by remembering who Harry was with now. Harry walked over to the table, thinking that he might offer to play a game of chess with Ron, since Draco was busy studying.

Just then, Ollie let out a soft, hoarse cry and they all looked up to see a strange screech owl landing on the sill of the open window with an envelope in its beak. It hopped in, flew to Draco and dropped the envelope in his lap, then circled and zoomed back out the window. "For me?" said Draco, surprised. "Who...?" He picked up the letter and turned it over. It appeared to be official Ministry stationery, addressed only to Draco Malfoy.

Harry came to the sofa and sat down next to Draco. "Go on, then," he said. "Maybe it's about the donations your father promised. Shacklebolt probably assigned someone to follow up on that."

Draco nodded and opened it, pulling out a folded sheet of paper. When he unfolded it, there was no

writing on it at all. Instead, a small gold coin fell out.

Harry, whose hands were free, reached out purely by reflex and caught it before it landed in Draco's lap. Immediately, he felt as if a hook behind his navel had jerked him violently forward, the unmistakeable sensation of a portkey. He heard Hermione scream his name; for one split second, he saw the puzzled look on Draco's face turn to alarm, then he was spun away, alone.

He landed hard, in total darkness. There was a dank, musty smell that he knew almost at once. He drew his wand. "Lumos," he whispered. The light from his wand illuminated a low-ceilinged, underground room. The escape-proof cellar at Malfoy Manor.

For a moment, Harry felt raw fury rise up in his throat. This trap had obviously been intended for Draco, and it was just as obvious that Yaxley was responsible. Yaxley must still be here at the Manor, hidden in a way that the Aurors had not been able to detect but that a house-elf could. And realising that, Harry remembered something else. Something he was sure Yaxley did not know, and a wide, exultant grin spread over his face.

"Kreacher," he said softly, aloud.

A heartbeat later, there was a loud crack and Kreacher was with him. "Master Harry!"

"Shhh," cautioned Harry. "I'm sure we don't have much time. Go home and tell Mr Draco I'm okay and that I'm in the cellar at the Manor. Tell him to let the Aurors outside the house know, and say that Yaxley is probably here too. Then come straight back to me. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Master Harry," whispered the elf. "Kreacher can!"

"And Kreacher," said Harry. "When you come back... bring the sword."

Kreacher gave Harry a ferocious, gleeful grin. "Yes, Master Harry!" he said.

Stealthy footsteps could be heard, then, crossing the floor above them. "Hurry!" whispered Harry, and with another crack, Kreacher was gone. The footsteps paused, then they ran, and a moment later, the door flew open and Yaxley stood at the foot of the stairs, silhouetted in the light of the open doorway, his wand drawn.

"You!" he snarled, when he saw Harry. Then he laughed. "Better," he said. "Even better."

"Yaxley," said Harry calmly, his wand pointed directly at Yaxley's chest. "You should surrender now, before you get hurt."

Yaxley took a step towards Harry, a scowl on his brutish face. "Oh no," he said, his voice derisive. "You've been a thorn in everyone's side since the day you were born. I'm going to finish you and leave you here in this cellar to rot. No one will know what's happened to their precious hero."

"Is that what you had planned for Draco?" asked Harry. Cold fury rose up in him again, but he contained it. "Were you going to kill him first or just let him die down here, alone in the dark?" He wanted to keep Yaxley talking to give Kreacher and the Aurors time to get here.

"The Malfoys were traitors," said Yaxley. "Narcissa betrayed the Dark Lord. She's going to pay for that with her son's life."

"Not if I can help it," said Harry. He was watching Yaxley very carefully, his wand poised and ready to counter any attack.

Yaxley laughed again. "You're not in a position to help anyone, Potter. You can't escape from this room, and you will die here. Now or later, it doesn't matter."

"I'm not afraid to die," said Harry. "But what makes you think you can kill me? What makes you think you

can do what Voldemort himself could never do?"

Harry saw Yaxley's wand arm falter and drop a little at that and he smiled to himself. "There's a flaw in the wards on this room that you don't know about," he said, pressing on, trying to throw Yaxley off balance. "I can escape from this room. I've done it before."

"Impossible," Yaxley sneered. "I helped the Dark Lord ward this room myself when we took Ollivander. It was not difficult to alter the design enough to let that portkey through. But no one can Apparate in or out of here."

"Ah," said Harry. "But you're wrong. There's something you and Voldemort failed to consider. It's your own arrogance that has betrayed you now." Merlin! he thought. Where was Kreacher? What was taking so long? He was fast running out of conversation here...

But then as if in answer to his very thought, crack! Kreacher was back. And Draco was with him, his wand drawn and instantly pointed at Yaxley. Kreacher raised the carving knife over his head, showed all his sharp, grey teeth, and snarled. Harry had never heard the elf make such an eerie, menacing sound and it raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

Yaxley looked completely unnerved. He took a step back, then turned and ran.

Instantly, Harry cast the Anti-Disapparation Jinx he'd learned from his book. He heard Yaxley grunt and knew his spell had hit true. Draco was already running for the door, and Harry took off too, hard on his heels. The second that Draco passed through the doorway and out of the wards, he Apparated. Harry ran up the stairs to find Draco blocking the far end of the hallway, facing off with Yaxley, his wand levelled at Yaxley's chest. Harry ran up behind, his wand also trained on the Death Eater. They had him cornered between them.

"He's mine!" shouted Draco.

"You? Ha!" said Yaxley, and there was harsh contempt in his voice. "The Dark Lord had no use for you.

You're nothing but a snivelling coward."

"That was before you hurt my mother, you bastard," said Draco fiercely. He looked like an avenging angel standing tall and fearless in the corridor. "I wanted to fight you before," he said, "but I thought staying alive was more important than what I believed was right. Not any more. I'm not afraid to fight you now!"

The hawthorn wand shot red sparks and Draco's eyes widened slightly, then a triumphant grin appeared on his face.

A leap of joy shot through Harry and he knew! The wand chooses the wizard! The hawthorn wand had chosen Draco again!

"Expelliarmus!" shouted Draco and Yaxley's wand flew in a high arc overhead.

"Incarcerous!" shouted Harry. Blue-green ropes shot from the tip of his wand and wrapped around Yaxley, tripping him as he tried to run so that he fell, bound and struggling, to the floor.

There was another crack! and Kreacher was suddenly standing over Yaxley, his bloody victory sword poised over the Death Eater's heart.

"Kreacher, no!" yelled Harry, appalled. He ran to Kreacher's side. Draco was there a split second later.

Kreacher looked up at Harry and deep disappointment showed on his face. "Just a little stab, Master Harry," he begged. "One little stab for Miss Cissy."

Yaxley wriggled and struggled on the floor. "Keep that vile creature away from me!" he bellowed.

"You shut up!" said Harry. "The only vile creature here is you!" Then he turned to Kreacher and lowered

his voice. "I can't let you stab him now, Kreacher, even if he does deserve it."

"Oh, what utter rubbish!" said Draco. "Here, let me." And in one swift motion he brought his foot down hard on Yaxley's face, stomping on his nose. Yaxley yelled something inarticulate. Blood spurted everywhere. "That's for Miss Cissy," said Draco decisively.

Kreacher raised the sword over his head and did a little victory dance, chanting in his deep croaking voice, "Mr Draco, Mr Draco, Mr Draco..."

Harry's eyes rolled up to the ceiling for a second. Then he looked back at the old elf and had to suppress a grin. "Kreacher," he said patiently, genuine affection in his voice, "would you please go home and let Hermione and Ron know we're all okay?"

Kreacher stopped dancing and bowed low to Harry. "Yes, Master Harry!" he said, and with a crack, he and his victory sword were gone.

Harry gave Draco a look. "What if the Aurors ask about that?" he said, motioning to Yaxley's broken nose.

"What?" said Draco with a sly smile. "We both saw him fall on his face when you Incarcerated him, didn't we?"

Harry snorted a laugh. "And where are the Aurors, by the way? Didn't Kreacher tell you to send the Aurors?"

Draco looked amused. "Granger and Weasley were going to send the Aurors," he said. "But I asked them to give me a ten minute head start. There was quite a... er... disagreement over that." He grinned. "They gave in, though, when they saw Kreacher with his sword." Draco put his arms around Harry's neck. "And I'm guessing the Aurors will be here at any moment, so..." He leaned in and kissed Harry long and hard.

There was a garbled moan from Yaxley on the floor. "You are fucking kidding me," he muttered.

They ignored him completely.

One long glorious kiss later, the front door to Malfoy Manor was blown off its hinges. Ten Aurors invaded the place, Minister Shacklebolt himself leading the way. Harry and Draco pulled reluctantly apart as the Aurors streamed into the hallway, wands drawn for battle.

Kingsley took one look at the scene before him and burst out laughing. "Higgins, Jenkins," he said. "Take the prisoner in. The rest of you, go back to duty." The sound of eight Aurors Disapparating filled the hallway, like firecrackers going off at close range. A moment later, Yaxley disappeared with the two assigned to take him in. Kingsley walked up to Harry and Draco and shook his head. "Why am I not surprised," he said. "Harry, well done!"

"It was Draco this time, sir," said Harry. "He disarmed Yaxley. I only tied him up." Harry gave Kingsley a brief report of all that had happened - except for the part where Draco had stomped on Yaxley's nose.

Kingsley turned an appraising eye on Draco and again, Harry saw that Kingsley's opinion of Draco had risen several more notches. Kingsley clapped his large hand down on Draco's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Well done to you, then, Mr Malfoy!" he said. "Excellent teamwork!" He gave Draco a little shake. "Have you ever considered becoming an Auror?"

Draco turned pink. "I'm thinking of becoming a Healer, sir," he said.

Shacklebolt beamed at him. "You can do both, you know," he said. "The Healer Corps of the Aurors is the most elite branch of the MLE."

"Oh," said Draco, his eyes sparking with interest. "You mean like the mediwizards that took my mother to St Mungo's the night we were attacked?"

"Exactly!" said Kingsley. "You give that some thought. Harry is coming to talk to me soon about starting training. If you think you're interested, come along with him. We'll talk." He released Draco and smiled at both of them.

"I think Yaxley knows some kind of advanced Disillusionment Charm," said Harry. "My house-elf sensed it, but the Aurors that checked here didn't. I'm sure he's been in and out of here the entire time we've been looking for him, waiting to see if Draco would come home. That's probably how he got away from the Great Hall after the battle at Hogwarts, too."

"Well spotted, Harry. We'll ask about that when we question him," said Kingsley. "If that's true, it would be a very useful spell for the Auror Department to know." He took a step back. "Sorry about your door," he said to Draco. "I'll have a repair crew out here shortly to fix it." Then he was gone with a sharp crack!

Draco put his arms around Harry's neck again and his head down on Harry's shoulder. "Take me home, Harry," he said.

A quiet thrill ran through Harry, for not only had Draco called him Harry, Draco had called Grimmauld Place home. Then he laughed. "You great fraud," he said, as his arms came up to hold Draco. "You don't need me. You're obviously completely capable of Apparating by yourself."

"No, I'm not," said Draco. He held up his left pinkie-finger so that Harry could see it. A tiny notch was missing from his fingernail. "Splinched," he said. "I may never Apparate again. You'll have to take me everywhere."

Harry laughed again. "But you've got the wand back, haven't you? I saw it spark."

"Yes," said Draco. He lifted his head to look into Harry's eyes. Harry saw quiet joy and confidence in the light grey eyes and that made him smile. "It's feels like its old self again," said Draco. "Maybe better. It's perfect."

"In that case," said Harry, tightening his arms around Draco, "I think it's your turn to take me."

Draco smirked at him.

"Er... home," said Harry, and he felt his face go warm. "Take me home, I meant."

"I can do both," said Draco. There was a soft, hopeful quality in his voice that went straight to Harry's heart.

"Oh," said Harry. "Oh, yeah." He grinned back at Draco's smile. "Go!"

And Draco took them home.

~***~ fin ~***~