

Contingency

by dorrie6

Fandom: Harry Potter

Pairing: Harry/Draco

Rating: PG-13

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Summary: Draco beats Harry at Quidditch and his universe implodes.

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"Good game, Malfoy."

A blur of red and gold brushed his left shoulder, and Draco snapped around to see a head of disheveled black hair moving rapidly toward the changing rooms. Certain that some sort of clever retort was required, he called upon his ready wit to provide one in a hurry.

"You too, Potter!"

Draco cursed his so-called wit.

At dinner in the Great Hall, he stared in the direction of the Gryffindor table. When it became clear that he'd been noticed, he added a sneer for good measure. Even in his least witty moments, he knew his sneer would come through for him. Not that it was having quite the effect he desired, considering that the real object of his stare appeared to be completely unconcerned, barely even glancing over when prodded by his cronies. This was frustrating to say the least, but Draco persisted, fairly confident that stubbornness on the face of a Malfoy heavily resembled intense malice.

When said object had finished his meal and bid farewell to his housemates, Draco gathered as much of the Malfoy pride as he could muster and followed him into the corridor. Unfortunately, Potter was walking much more quickly than he had any right to, and Draco realized that he would either have to run to catch up, or yell to get his attention, neither of which was especially dignified. Pressed for time, he chose the option that would, at least, not leave him out of breath.

"Potter!"

Potter stopped and turned, his face displaying a maddening combination of annoyance and amusement.

"Malfoy?"

Draco swallowed, lifted his chin in a way that he hoped looked aristocratic, and summoned his haughtiest tone.

"Why did you say that before?"

"What?"

"You know. 'Good game.' That rubbish."

"Well. It was."

"I beat you."

"Yes, exactly."

Clearly this was a world gone mad.

"Oh."

Draco felt his aristocratic chin falter slightly, at which time Potter had the nerve to stifle a smile.

"Is that all, then?"

Flustered, Draco fell back on the trusty sneer.

"Yes. Fine, then. Well. Just wait until next time!"

Potter's smile was no longer stifled.

"Malfoy, you beat me this time."

It occurred to Draco that he was very possibly being made fun of by Potter. This was infuriating. And impossible. And definitely against the laws of nature and wizard-kind. Feeling that the dignity of the pure-blood wizarding world had been thrust upon his shoulders, Draco took a deep breath, channeled his father and gave an imperious snort.

"Right. And I will again."

With a final menacing glare, Draco whirled around with a flourish and stalked off in the direction of the Slytherin common room.

Draco paced.

Slytherin House was used to this. Draco Malfoy paced often, always in the center of the common room. Pansy had wondered once, out of earshot of course, how long it would take before he wore through the floor and fell into the lower dungeons. Frequently he did this while ranting, but sometimes he paced silently, brow furrowed, jaw rigid, eyes cold with something that went beyond fury. The Slytherins, possessing powerful survival instincts, were never so foolish as to interrupt Draco Malfoy while he was pacing in this manner, at least not since Millicent Bulstrode had nearly been transfigured into a Yak their second week of school.

On this particular evening, however, there was a new element to the pacing. Even Crabbe and Goyle had noticed. Draco's stride was shorter and more erratic. His eyes lacked either the dangerous coldness or the blazing fire that usually accompanied this activity. Instead, his vision seemed to be turned inward, showing no emotion, making him appear oddly vulnerable in a way that was entirely inappropriate to the Draco Malfoy they had endured for more than six years. This was, the Slytherins felt, cause for alarm.

A group of seventh years huddled whispering near the fireplace, though it seemed likely that they could have shouted to each other without Draco noticing. Finally Pansy won the unenviable task of doing what no one had dared since first year. She rose slowly from her seat and approached her pacing housemate, trying to appear casual while keeping a safe distance.

"Draco?" She began, her voice shaking slightly.

There was no answer.

She steeled herself and tried to project a more confident tone. "Wonderful show on the Quidditch pitch today, Draco!"

The pacing stopped, and Draco's eyes came back to the room, his sharp gaze pointed at Pansy.

She felt a small shiver of panic, but she could handle it. She wasn't a Slytherin by accident.

"We always knew you could beat Potter."

Draco stared for a few moments as Pansy's smile faded, and then turned and disappeared down the hall, with no sound but the slamming of a door.

Draco had long ago learned that the only place in Hogwarts he could really be alone was the dark of his own bed. Anywhere else he had to be ever watchful. He had to plan his responses, please the right people and exhibit proper contempt for the rest. He had to rule his house, keep Crabbe and Goyle in line, prove his superiority to the Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers. He had to be Lucius Malfoy's son in every word and look. And Potter. He had to watch for Potter. This didn't worry him. It was the way things had always been. It was as they were meant to be. Still, he

enjoyed the solitude of night--the relief of lowering his guard, of being left alone to ponder what pleased him.

I won, he thought. *I won I won I won*.

He had dreamed of those two words for six years, even ached for them. Now that they were his to say, they felt false. Empty. Each time he thought them, he waited for the joy he'd been expecting to swell up in his chest, to send a tingle all the way to his fingertips. He waited for the deep satisfaction that he knew he'd feel when he finally took what was his, when he finally beat Potter. He repeated the words again and waited. He felt nothing.

There was no doubt it was Potter's fault. *Bloody Potter*. It was so like Potter, to find a way to ruin even this. There wasn't any part of Draco's life Potter touched that didn't go straight to hell. Draco tossed violently, only the threat of being discovered awake keeping him from punching his pillow as well. He wasn't sure there was any threat that would keep him from punching Potter on next sight. He wasn't a violent person. He considered it below him, and preferred to have Crabbe and Goyle take care of such things.

Potter, however, was the one person who could make him really come close to losing control. Potter made him feel foolish and small. It was infuriating. He wanted nothing more than to wipe the smug smile off that face, or at least bloody it up a bit. His hatred of Potter went beyond the clean violence of Cruciatus or anything that could be done with magic, cold and at a distance. Potter made him want to get his hands dirty--to actually feel flesh bruising and breaking beneath his fingers, to feel the pain he could cause with his own hands. He thought somehow that maybe if he could tear him apart by hand, there might be some small chance that Potter would actually understand, even minutely, the intensity of Draco's hatred for him. This was all he wanted. He wanted Potter to really know. The fact that he did not was obvious, and made more so by his maddening civility earlier in the day. For him to belittle Draco's hatred like that was insulting and showed just how little Potter thought of him.

Not that he wanted Potter to think of him with favor. Rather, he thought he deserved the grudging respect given to an enemy, to be acknowledged a worthy adversary. Today proved him undeniably wrong about that, and even Draco was surprised at how upsetting it was to him, which only outraged him further.

The door creaked open and he heard Crabbe stumbling about, muttering curses as he tripped over his own shoes. This was the sign that Draco's nightly race for sleep was about to begin, his opponent being Crabbe's horrendous snoring. Draco usually fell into sleep easily, but tonight would be a struggle. Tomorrow he'd be exhausted and irritable, another thing to blame Potter for. As his anger rose again, he heard the opening strains of Crabbe's infamous snores wafting through the air (accompanied by at least one angry groan from the other side of the room). So much for sleep.

He stared at the velvet curtains surrounding his bed, trying to see their cool, rich green in the dark, counting the folds with his hands. When he was younger, he had been able to imagine that he was in the middle of a forest known only to him, surrounded by tall, protecting trees as he lay

on a bed of moss, soft as the curtains he brushed with his fingertips. He tried to call this image forward without success. Undaunted, he closed his eyes, inhaling deeply, and after a few moments opened them again to gaze up at the curtains, willing them green and majestic. This time the scene began to form, starlit sky through leafy green, velvet moss under his fingers-- beautiful, cool, peaceful. But something was not right. The tallest tree wore the face of his father, sneering down at him, eyes filled with disappointment and contempt as he spoke.

"You idiotic boy. To think you could save him."

In the distance, Draco heard a low cry followed by a menacing voice.

"Avada Kedav--"

Suddenly Draco was awake, heart pounding, Crabbe snoring louder than ever. Draco lay still, afraid to move, as though it might bring him back to the forest, which obviously no longer offered the comfort of his childhood. He resented this, and felt certain of who was to blame--who was always to blame. His anger burned, steady and deep. When it had finally battled his fear enough for him to move, Draco turned on his stomach and settled in for what was sure to be a long night, the horrible voice from his dream still echoing in his ears, accompanied by Crabbe's snoring.

It would be a very long night indeed.

Bloody Potter.

Draco slept through breakfast, and arrived in class with puffy eyes and the kind of disposition that frightened even his closest friends. The previous night's dreams hadn't gotten much better, from what Draco could recall, which wasn't much. His father's face and that awful voice uttering the killing curse kept reappearing. He didn't know what it was about, and he didn't care. He just wanted it gone. Due to his mood, the Slytherins kept their distance in class. He hoped everyone else had the sense to do the same. Fortunately it was double Potions. Snape was the one professor he could count on to not bother him when he was out of sorts. Also he had a satisfying tendency to give the Gryffindors hell, which was always amusing. Not that Draco was much in the mood to be amused. He didn't seem to be much in the mood for anything, actually, except perhaps staring into space. It was only upon interruption that it became clear that the space he'd been staring into was occupied by Potter. It was the Weasel who noticed first.

"Malfoy, what's your problem?"

Draco wondered how it was possible that a Gryffindor possessed a look so foul.

"Well?" Weasley persisted.

Draco, being in a mood far fouler than Weasley's look, snorted and looked back to his cauldron, which, he was interested to note, contained nothing.

Still the Weasel was not satisfied. "Malfoy, I asked you a question."

Sneer at the ready, Draco found himself momentarily paralyzed by the quiet voice that followed.

"Leave it, Ron."

Potter.

Weasley turned an alarming shade of red as he sputtered, "Harry?" He sounded betrayed.

For once, Draco could relate. The indignity of being defended by Potter was unparalleled. He felt the heat of last night's anger crawl up his face. He was much too tired for this. With great difficulty, he focused on his cauldron.

"Get stuffed, Potter," he said, trying to keep his voice even.

The Weasel's eyes were bulging. "Harry--"

The low voice replied, "Just leave it. He wasn't doing anything."

Potter's voice contained only the barest trace of strain. This was not acceptable. This was also Potions class. As much as Snape favored Draco, he probably would consider it rather below his supposed level of maturity to brawl with Potter in NEWT Potions. Never mind that Potter seemed to possess the ability to reduce Draco to his 11-year-old self with little more than a word. In any other class, he probably would have given in to this childish fury, but his respect for Professor Snape won out. *Lucky for Potter.* How Potter (let alone Weasley) ever got in to NEWT Potions, Draco would never understand, but there they were and here he was and this empty cauldron was just getting more and more interesting by the second.

Composing himself as much as possible, Draco lifted his head, not letting his eyes focus on Potter, and spoke in what turned out to be a rough whisper.

"We'll discuss this later, Potter."

"Fine." was Potter's calm reply.

The Weasel made a noise, but was squelched by a look from Granger.

"Harry's right, Ron," she whispered. "Malfoy's not worth the energy."

Draco was left to seethe in silence through the rest of class. Afterwards, he made sure to place himself in Potter's way as he tried to exit the classroom.

"Malfoy?" His face was unreadable.

"Later, Potter," Draco hissed. "We're going to have this out later. After dinner."

Potter nodded absently, strands of black hair falling in his eyes. "Sure. Whatever, Malfoy," he said, pushing his way out and down the hall.

The prospect of a fight revived Draco thoroughly, and as he approached the Great Hall for dinner that evening, he noticed something that resembled a spring in his step. This good mood sobered when the Gryffindor table was found devoid of one particular seventh year student, along with his inseparable friends. By the time Draco had finished eating, that student still absent, Draco's disposition had become positively deadly. He barely heard the entreaties of the other Slytherins, urging him into an evening of House dueling (which generally devolved into a fist fight between Crabbe and Goyle) as he stalked from the table, scowling, into the hall. He spent the next two hours wandering through the endless wings of Hogwarts, seeking The Boy Who Lived.

He finally spotted him with the other two (of course) in a corridor by the library. After a few minutes, Weasley and Granger departed with great purpose and Potter headed inside. Draco saw his opportunity and pounced upon it. He strode to the library doors, flung them open and surveyed the room, spotting Potter settling in at a table near the Restricted Section. Draco took a breath, lifted his head and walked toward his enemy. *Still my enemy.*

"Potter."

Potter looked up from his pile of papers and books. He seemed distracted and surprised to see him. Clearly he'd forgotten. Draco's rage began to burn in his chest. "Malfoy? Um, look, no offence but I'm very busy just now. Can we do this later?"

Draco lifted his chin. "No, Potter. Now."

Potter removed his glasses, rubbed at his eyes for a moment, then placed his glasses back on his nose.

"Malfoy, really. I'm--look, we can talk tomorrow about whatever you want. I just really can't right now."

"I don't care what poncy Gryffindor ridiculousness you're up to. This is important, and I'm going to stay here until you listen to me." Draco sat in the chair across from Potter and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

Potter looked weary. "Fine, then," he said, as he gathered up his books and papers and headed for the small staircase behind him.

"Potter, that's the Restricted Section."

Potter kept going. "Yes, I know. I have a pass from McGonagall."

Draco followed.

"Malfoy. This is the Restricted Section."

"Umbridge gave me unlimited access in fifth year. Now, will you just stop for one second-"

"Wait a minute," Potter interrupted, stopping and turning to face him. "Umbridge gave the son of a Death Eater unlimited access to the Restricted Section."

Draco was becoming annoyed. "Yes. She did. Now, look-"

"She was more idiotic than I thought." Potter turned around and continued away from Draco at a brisk pace.

Draco chased after him. "I only used it to get away from Crabbe and Goyle, now will you just listen?"

Potter turned again. "Look, I'm sorry for the inconvenience. I can understand how my busy schedule of attempting to defeat the Dark Lord and save the entire wizarding and Muggle world might be a problem for you, but I really don't have time for this right now."

"This would take two seconds if you could just get it through your great, hideous head that-"

"Later, Malfoy." Potter started to walk away again.

Draco could feel rage flowing through his limbs, engulfing him completely. With enormous, decisive strides, he closed the distance between them, grabbed Potter and shoved him up against the stacks, pinning him there, Potter's books and papers tumbling in all directions.

"Listen Potter! I am Draco Malfoy and you will bloody well pay attention to me!"

The urge to destroy, to rip flesh from bones was completely overwhelming. Without even thinking about what he was doing or why, Draco flung himself against Potter and assaulted him with all the strength and fury he possessed. It was only after several moments, as he was thrown backwards with considerable force, staring at a very red-faced Potter, that he realized that what he'd actually been doing was kissing him. A lot. Plus some other things.

"What the hell was that, Malfoy?"

Draco, dumbfounded, stared.

"Malfoy?"

"Well, you weren't listening."

"So you thought you'd snog me into attention?"

"It worked, didn't it?"

For a moment they both stood, silent, breathing.

"You smell like strawberries." Draco wondered what kind of dark magic had taken over his power of speech and wished it to screw itself.

Potter cocked one eyebrow. "You kiss like Neville Longbottom."

Draco was scandalized.

"At least strawberries smell good, Potter!"

Potter shrugged. "Longbottom's a hell of a kisser." He grinned. "You have no idea."

"Longbottom??"

"Oh, definitely."

"When were you kissing Longbottom?" Draco felt sure he was hallucinating.

Potter seemed unruffled. "Most of last year, actually. I was a terrible wreck when he broke it off. I'm surprised you didn't notice."

"Longbottom broke it off with you?" He was definitely hallucinating.

"Yes, in the middle of the Spring term." He developed a slow, wicked grin. "Face it, Malfoy. You've just been snogging Neville Longbottom's castoff."

Draco felt that sudden death might have been appropriate at this moment. Unfortunately the moment did not oblige.

"Sod off, Potter." Draco turned to leave. He was stopped by Potter's hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry, Malfoy," he said. "Look, you wanted my attention. You've got it. So what did you want to say?"

Draco took a deep breath. Finally they were returning to sanity. Finally the matter at hand.

"I hate you, Potter." There. Done.

Potter seemed to be waiting for something else. After a few moments, his eyes grew wide. Draco was startled by their clear, true green. It reminded him of something.

"That's it, Malfoy?" Potter bit his lip to suppress a smile, insufferable as always. "That's what you're trying to tell me?" The suppression thing was really not working. "You snogged me in order to get it through my 'great, hideous head' that you hate me?"

This was not going well.

"Yes." Draco tried to look dignified. He had doubts about his success.

Potter was still smiling. "I see. Well. If only Voldemort hated me as much as you do, I wouldn't have to bother with all this wretched research." He gestured toward the mass of papers and books on the floor. "I could simply shag him and be done with it."

This was too much. "I do not want to shag you, Potter!"

"Well, that's a relief." Potter turned and began to walk away again.

"Potter!" Draco shouted after him. "Potter I hate you, do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. You hate me," Potter called over his shoulder. "Goodnight, Malfoy." He continued around the corner, and disappeared into the stacks, his books and papers still scattered on the floor.

A few minutes later, Draco realized he was still standing in the same place. He shook his head, let out a long breath and wandered back through the library and out in to the hall where he sought out the comfort of a cold wall to lean upon. Nothing was as it should be. He could think of nothing but what he had done, along with the horrifying possibility that he might, in fact, want to shag Potter. The shock of this was simply too much to bear. He was completely lost, without even anger to cling to. Legs weak, Draco sank slowly to the floor and let his head fall onto his knees, finding support and certainty in the solid marble beneath him. He focused on patterns in the marble, comforted by their predictability, their unwavering acquiescence to form. When his mind was finally clear enough to think he might be found there, so obviously vulnerable, he dragged himself to his feet and turned towards the Slytherin dungeons.

Draco Malfoy was not an advocate of introspective thought. He disliked hesitation and abhorred complication. He preferred simple feelings, the more straightforward the better. He liked emotions he could count on to be themselves. Hate, for instance. Hate was just about as absolute

as one could get. There was nothing wishy-washy about hate. When Draco found something he hated, he strived to stamp it out, or at least hurt it. It was that simple. This was the type of existence he could appreciate.

His childhood lessons in hatred had been simple and satisfying. He would never forget the day his father had taken him aside and told him that the world was full of people who were not like him--people who were inferior to wizards in every way, who couldn't even manage the simplest of schoolboy spells. These people were jealous. They hated wizards for their superiority and would destroy them if they could. Wizards (or at least those who respected their own kind) hated these non-magical people (if they could even be called "people") in turn. There was no question of the correctness of this, the utter righteousness. In his heart, Draco felt a new warmth--a fire that burned with the certainty of pure hatred. It was both invigorating and comforting. His father, he thought, had given him a great gift, one that he had carefully nurtured ever after.

How was it then, at the age of eighteen, that Draco Malfoy found himself lying in bed, wrestling with the formerly simple and comfortable concept of hate? He hated Harry Potter. He always had. He was sure of it. There had been no fact so constant in all his years at Hogwarts as this. Draco Malfoy hated Harry Potter. This was a universal truth.

So why, then? What could have possessed him to act as he had? Was he fooling himself? Had he been all this time? And for how long? It didn't seem possible. He had not had one moment of doubt regarding his hatred for Harry Potter until this evening. And when had it changed from "Potter" to "Harry Potter"? This disturbingly resembled some sort of bridge to "Harry", which was not right at all.

Potter. Potter Potter Potter. I hate Potter.

That was better.

Draco really wanted to sleep. It offered the closest thing to comfort available at the moment. He wanted to sleep, and then tomorrow he would speak with Potter. If he talked to Potter, he was certain to come to his senses. Potter must know what was going on. Perhaps he'd put a spell on him. Yes. He just needed to talk to Potter.

As Draco began to drift off, bits of an image were forming in his mind--a tall tree, velvet moss, his father's face. "... *To think you could save him...*" the other voice he dreaded becoming almost clear enough to hear.

No.

Draco gripped the sides of his bed and took a deep breath. Reaching for something to soothe him, he focused on the cool, dark green of his curtains, barely visible. There was something else there--something he could fold himself up in, warm and constant. Safe. Soon he sank into sleep, barely aware that he was falling into the endless green of Harry Potter's eyes.

The next morning found Draco quite rested and downright chipper, so much so that there were whispers among his housemates about the possibility that he might be possessed. He was the first down to breakfast, and was quite pleased to see, sitting alone at the Gryffindor table, exactly the person he wished to speak to. This surprised him, though perhaps not quite so much as the fact that he was hit with a small wave of nervousness as he approached the table. Since when was he nervous with Potter? He brushed the feeling off impatiently, strode to his destination, cleared his throat and spoke.

"Good morning, Potter. We need to talk."

Now that he had actually spoken out loud, he felt that his words sounded rather inane. Potter possibly thought the same, since he looked up with the strangest expression Draco had ever seen on his face up to this point. He seemed, also, to have been struck speechless. Draco, feeling unusually helpful, decided it was up to him to continue.

"I was hoping we could talk sometime later, perhaps before dinner." Potter's look had not changed. "If that's all right with you, that is."

Potter blinked and opened his mouth slightly as if to respond, but no sound came out. Draco went on.

"I need to ask you about... some things."

I need to ask you about some things? Draco was definitely finished talking for the moment. Fortunately Potter recovered at this point.

"Um. Sure. Malfoy. I mean. I guess so."

As he said this, Draco noticed that he had dark circles under his eyes, and that his hair was even more askew than usual. He wondered if Potter had slept at all since he last saw him. He also wondered why he wondered.

"So..." Draco was unsure how to wrap this up.

Potter shook his head and seemed to finally return to this world. "Right. So, the library then? I'll be there after Divination."

Draco let out a relieved breath. "Yes. Good." Students from both their houses were beginning to arrive, finding them to be quite an interesting spectacle. "Right, then," Draco said. "I'll see you there."

The spring in his step as Draco headed over to his own table was familiar, though it came along with a woozy feeling, which he decided to ignore for the moment. The rest of the day floated by

in a haze, until Draco was finally finished with his last class for the afternoon. He was actually quite startled to find that the day had ended.

When he arrived at the library shortly afterwards, Draco found Potter at the same table as the evening before, looking as though he'd already been poring through his books and papers for hours.

"Been here long?" Draco asked, trying to sound conversational.

Potter lifted his head and looked almost sheepish. "Oh. Hi. Um, well I skipped Divination, actually. Nothing important ever happens there, and well... I have a lot of work to do."

Draco sat in the chair across from him, and waited for inspiration to hit. Inspiration, it seemed, was not forthcoming, and after a few moments, they were firmly ensconced in the territory of awkward silence. Eventually, Potter came to the rescue.

"So. Er, what did you want to talk about, Malfoy?"

"Oh! Right. Well, I've been thinking a lot about what happened yesterday evening." Draco paused.

"Oh?" Potter's expression was completely neutral.

"Yes, well." Draco gathered his thoughts and continued. "See, Potter, the thing is, I hate you."

Potter sat up and raised his eyebrow. "Wait, Malfoy. Does this mean you're going to kiss me again? Because I'd really rather you didn't."

"What? No! I mean--well, I don't think so."

"You don't think so?" He wasn't quite laughing. "Wonderful. That's very reassuring." Potter opened one of the books in front of him and began to read. This was not going at all as planned.

Draco was completely flustered. "Wait! Stop! I mean--I'm sorry, I--I just want to figure out why I did it the first time, that's all."

Potter looked back up and regarded him for a moment.

"So you thought that if you talked to me, what? That I'd say I put a spell on you? That I'd calmly explain away your messed-up teenage lust?"

Kind of. "No! I just thought you might know something... that you could tell me." Things were deteriorating rapidly.

"I'm afraid you're on your own for this, Malfoy. Or perhaps you should talk to Snape. He's there to assist Slytherins in emotional peril, right?" Potter's tone was even and unconcerned.

Draco took a breath and tried to start again. "Please Potter, I just thought that maybe if I--"

"Why do you even want to talk about it, Malfoy? Do you want to continue? Are you looking for true love? To sweep me off my feet and make me forget Longbottom?"

Draco reddened and stared at his hands.

"I didn't think so." Potter's voice was calm as he returned to his book.

Draco thought this was probably his cue to leave, but he felt compelled to ignore it. For a few minutes they sat in silence--Potter's face buried in a book, though his eyes had a look that suggested that he was far away. Finally Draco spoke.

"Why did he break it off? Longbottom?" Draco was vaguely appalled to hear these words coming from his own mouth.

Potter's eyes came back into focus, brows furrowing as they did so. Draco wondered if he was about to be punched in the face, and thought it was possible he deserved it. When Potter replied, though, there was no anger.

"He said he never felt I was completely there. With him, I mean."

Draco had no idea how to respond. He understood now the advantages of avoiding emotional sharing. Potter didn't seem to notice.

"He was right," he said, looking back to his book.

They sat in silence again for a while, and Draco wondered if he should be saying something comforting. He sincerely hoped not. After several minutes, Potter spoke again.

"Why are you still here, Malfoy?"

Draco was taken aback. "I--" Perhaps he'd overestimated his success at the sharing bit.

"No, I don't mean that. I mean, why are you still at Hogwarts?"

Confused, Draco just stared.

Potter continued, "We know the Death Eaters are on the move, and intelligence tells us that you've received several invitations to join them." Draco felt himself bristle, but Potter ignored him and went on. "I should think you'd be anxious to stand at your father's side. So why are you still here?"

Draco was too surprised to be furious at the question, though he knew he should be. He glanced at Potter, expecting his face to be smug and righteous, but found it instead to be earnest and a little perplexed.

"I--" Draco frowned and looked back at his hands. The truth was, he wasn't sure why he was still here. Potter was right, he'd gotten several owls in the past month, encouraging him to leave Hogwart's and join his father. He was of age, and his father could no longer command him to do things, but in the past he would not have hesitated to do anything his father asked, if only to please him. He didn't know what had changed. He'd named his excuses--that he wanted to finish his NEWTS, that he was at the peak of his Quidditch game--and these things were true, but they sounded like excuses, and he knew it. He didn't know what the real reason was, or if there even was any larger reason. Perhaps it wasn't so much that he had no reason to stay, but rather that he had no compelling reason to go. All he knew for certain was that joining up with the Dark Lord to fight a mighty war against anyone was something he had no interest in doing, and that deep down he was hoping that something would happen to make it unnecessary before his excuses ran out. He didn't much care what.

"I don't know." He lifted his eyes back to Potter, whose expression was almost warm.

"I'm right, though, aren't I?" Potter asked softly. "You've been invited."

Draco was a bit annoyed, thinking of Dumbledore's minions intercepting his owls. "Well yes, of course. Your 'intelligence' has done a fine job."

Potter's voice was still quiet. "Right."

They sat in silence again for a while, Potter staring absently at the table, and then he stood suddenly and started to the Restricted Section. "Come on," he said.

Draco stared, confused. "What?"

"Just come on," Potter repeated and disappeared into the stacks.

Draco sat for a moment and then hurried up the steps to follow Potter, who was nowhere to be seen. He weaved through the tall shelves and finally spotted him standing near the end of a row, facing the books. Draco walked until he was beside him. When Potter still did not look at him, he asked, "What are you doing?"

Finally Potter turned to face him. He was flushed and his eyes looked strange. After a long moment, he answered.

"Assisting a Slytherin in emotional peril."

With one hand he reached up and pulled Draco's face to his and kissed him. It was a slow, soft kiss, completely different from that of the previous evening. Draco tensed at first, and had every intention of pulling away, but his body did not agree. Against his better judgment, his arms

wrapped themselves around Potter's waist, and his lips softened and began returning the kiss. He had no idea how long they stood there, just kissing, but as far as Draco was concerned, it could have continued indefinitely. It was Potter who broke away, distancing himself slightly, but keeping a gentle hold on Draco's hands which had somehow made their way into his.

"I have to go," he said, his voice apologetic.

Draco started to speak, but was interrupted by a warm smile from Potter.

"We can talk more later if you want to," Potter said, eyes searching Draco's face almost imperceptibly. "Or we can just leave it. Whichever you want." He then let go of Draco's hands and left.

Draco Malfoy, once again, found himself standing alone in the Restricted Section.

The idea of going down to dinner was not especially inviting. The idea of leaving the solitude of the stacks and being confronted with anyone or anything at all was not thrilling. Instead, Draco remained in the Restricted Section, sitting on the floor, through dinnertime and beyond. He sat, barely moving. His mind was oddly quiet. He might have thought he was in shock, except he suspected that by simply thinking that, he'd proven it unlikely. He didn't bother to try to work anything out in his head. What was the point, when everything that made sense had been blown to bits? So he just sat.

He sat, and occasionally thought about kissing Potter. Well, perhaps a little more than occasionally. He was clinging to the sensation, though it kept trying to slip away from him. He definitely had never felt anything like it. It bore no resemblance to the sloppy lip mashing he'd practiced with Pansy in fourth and fifth year (before she moved on to Zabini who paid her more attention). It was also nothing like the passionate mauling he'd attempted the night before, which had been satisfying certainly in some ways but was more of a blur now than anything else. Kissing Potter this evening was something entirely new. It had been warm and comforting while also sending the most incredible sparks through his entire body. He could still feel them when he thought about it. It had left him dizzy and wanting.

By the time Draco had shaken himself out of his daze enough to notice that voices were approaching, they were almost upon him. He scrambled to his feet in a panic and flew to a dark corner behind some very dusty shelves. The choice of hiding place could probably be chalked up to his addled mind and the fact that the voices in question were very obviously Granger and Weasley. Draco was certain that if they saw him, they would be able to tell immediately what had transpired between him and Potter. Logic was, for the moment, eluding him.

The Weasel and his Mudblood were bickering about something. Draco did not know or care what. He was concerned only with slowing down his panicked heart and trying to conjure back

the sensation of kissing Potter. All he wanted from his intruders was for them to find what they came for and leave him in peace. At the mention of Potter's name, however, he suddenly became alert.

"Well, I don't know where he is!" It was Weasley. "It's not like he's been over-sharing lately."

Granger replied, "Well, you might not be either if you were under the kind of pressure he is right now."

"But I am! We all are!" Weasley nearly shouted. "We're all fighting this war! We're all in danger!"

"It isn't the same and you know it, Ron." Granger sounded extremely irritated. It seemed like an argument they'd had more than once. "It's different for him. He knows it's him or Voldemort. Period. You can't tell me knowing something like that wouldn't affect you."

"I don't need some stupid prophecy to tell me that Voldemort will most likely kill me."

"Ron!" Granger's tone made Draco wonder if she was going to slap him.

Weasley suddenly became quiet. "I know. I'm sorry." There was a long pause. "I don't know why I said that."

All talking seemed to cease, and Draco wondered if they had left. Then he heard the tell-tale smacking and cringed. It occurred to Draco that the Astronomy Tower had nothing on the Restricted Section these days.

Finally Granger spoke again. "We should probably try to find Harry."

Weasley sighed. "Yeah."

"Well," Granger said, "It looks like he's been here already. All the books we need are gone."

"Maybe the common room?" Weasley didn't sound hopeful.

"I suppose he might have got back there by now," Granger replied, her voice fading as they left.

Draco waited a few minutes until he was sure it was safe, and then emerged from his corner, brushing dust from his robes. It was time to find Potter.

Not that Draco knew what he was going to do when he did find Potter. The list of things that he did not understand was growing steadily and he was running on pure instinct. This was definitely

untrodden territory, which frightened him a bit, but not enough to stop him. As he rounded a corner and found himself back at the library, he got an idea.

He was not surprised to find Potter back at his old familiar table.

"Potter," he said, unsure how to continue.

"Malfoy." Potter's tone was pleasant, with a hint of surprise and maybe even relief, though Draco supposed he could have been wrong about that.

Draco shifted his weight, but did not sit down.

"Granger and Weasley are looking for you, did you know?"

Potter's voice squeaked a little. "Oh? Hm. I just keep missing them I guess."

"It couldn't be that you're avoiding them or anything, I suppose." Draco narrowed his eyes a bit.

Potter's face didn't change, but his eyes brightened slightly, as though he were smiling.

"No, of course not. Why would I do a thing like that?"

"I don't know," Draco began slowly. "Why would you?" he asked, sliding into a chair.

Potter said nothing for a moment, but did not drop his gaze. Draco raised one eyebrow in what he hoped was a Potter-esque manner. Potter gave him a small smile.

"Well, I suppose you've already figured that out, since you know enough to ask."

Draco laughed. "Potter, I haven't been able to figure anything out for the past two days."

At this, Potter's smile grew a little larger, though his eyes lost their brightness.

"I haven't been much help with that, have I?"

"No, not really, " Draco answered, smiling.

"Listen, Malfoy," Potter's smile was gone. "I'm. I'm a wreck. You shouldn't pay any attention to what I--to anything I say. I don't know what I'm doing. You shouldn't pay attention to any of it."

Draco felt the air go out of his lungs in a very annoying manner.

"None of it?" He choked out.

Potter dropped his eyes, cheeks flushing.

"Well, I don't..." he trailed off and then seemed to recover. "What do you want, Malfoy?" His voice was almost a whisper.

Draco thought perhaps he might be falling ill. His mind was swimming, but he felt that he had to come up with some sort of answer quickly or risk losing... he didn't even know what, but he knew it was important.

"I want to... to kiss you again." Draco was mortified at his own words. "Often. As much as you'll let me. And maybe." *Kill me now, please.* "I mean... I just... I want to kiss you." Things were not getting any better. Draco wondered if anything in the Restricted Section could help him come up with a spell to delete time.

Potter was quiet, his expression unreadable. Draco felt certain he would vomit. He definitely ought to see Pomfrey later.

Finally Potter spoke. "Is that all?"

Draco wasn't sure what to answer, but that didn't seem to be stopping him lately. "That's... that's all I know for sure. Everything else is a bit muddled." He smiled weakly and prayed for his own death.

"Okay."

Draco blinked. "What?"

"Okay. You can kiss me."

Draco blinked again. He wasn't exactly sure how this sort of exchange was supposed to go, but he was pretty sure that this was not it.

"That's it?" Draco's ability for speech seemed to have reduced itself to one or two word sentences.

"Look, Malfoy," Potter's voice was even and precise but not cold. "Everything's gone mad. There's a war on, and I--we don't know who might not make it through."

"Meaning you." Draco broke in, a bit shocked at himself. "You might not make it through."

Potter looked at him for a moment. "Yes, that's right. I might not make it through." He paused again, and then continued, "So it's foolish to make any plans or big declarations or anything like that. We should just--well, if you want something and I want something, we should just have that. And not worry about the rest. There's no point."

Draco felt something warm spread through his abdomen. "So you're saying that you want it as well. It's... it's not just me, then."

Potter flushed again and gave him a tiny smile. "No, it's not just you."

The warmth revealed itself to be intense relief, with some other unknown thing fluttering about the edges. "Okay then," Draco said, feeling like he'd just made some very strange business deal, though he was fairly certain that business deals did not come with fluttery things in one's stomach area.

Potter's smile was quite dazzling. "Good," he said. His eyes were drawn to the door and his smile faded, replaced very briefly with a distinct look of disappointment which was covered almost immediately by a much wider, but somehow less genuine smile. Draco turned his head to witness the return of Granger and Weasley.

The two of them noticed Draco at the same time. It stopped them momentarily, and then Granger grabbed hold of Weasley's arm and pulled him the rest of the way.

Granger shot Draco an annoyed look and headed straight for Potter. "Harry, where have you been? We've been running after you for hours!"

Weasley cut to the chase. "What's he doing here?" He said, pointing to Draco who he had been glaring at since he saw him.

Potter, faced with the accusing stares of both his friends, displayed almost no emotion at all. "We were just talking," he said, "and I'm sorry, Hermione. I don't know how we missed each other."

"Well, he has to go." Weasley was still pointing.

"Weasley, you're going to put someone's eye out," Draco drawled, feeling something familiar and comfortable coming back to him. It felt good, though somehow not as good as he remembered.

Weasley glared. "That's the idea."

Draco stood up, the warmth in his chest rapidly turning to anger.

"He can stay if he wants." Potter said quietly, causing Weasley to turn crimson and Draco to be reminded of the fluttery things which were evidently still present.

Granger predictably defended her Weasel. "Ron's right, Harry. No offence to Malfoy, " she said in a tone that was clearly meant to offend, "but we can't talk about the things we need to with him here. It's not safe."

"He's not on our side," Weasley said. "He'll run and tell everything to daddy." He resumed glaring at Draco. "You might as well just owl Voldemort and save him the trouble."

"Of course, how silly of me," Potter replied. "We'd best not let anyone know about our startling advances in sheep herding. It could bring the whole operation to its knees."

Granger reddened. "They weren't supposed to be sheep!" She gave Draco another scathing glance, as though he were to blame for all manner of evil in the universe, especially regarding livestock. "And anyway, Dumbledore has found a better method of--"

"Dumbledore is grasping at straws, Hermione!" Potter suddenly exploded. "Don't you get it? He doesn't know how to pull this off! Nobody does! No matter how long we stare at these books, we're going to be in the same position we are now. Doomed. Completely and utterly doomed." He whirled around to Draco. "So, Malfoy, if you please, don't tell your father about our really secret plans for coming to our exceedingly painful and untimely deaths while tossing sheep droppings at the Dark Lord, okay? Thanks, I really appreciate it." With this, he picked up his books and stormed out of the library, letting the doors slam behind him.

Draco looked at Weasley and Granger, who seemed to be very interested in their shoes. He didn't understand why they were still there. "Aren't you going to go after him?" He asked.

Granger looked up helplessly. "I--" she began, and then bit her lip.

Draco stared in disbelief for a moment, and then ran out the door after Potter.

Potter was just barely in sight by the time Draco got to the corridor.

"Potter!" he shouted.

Potter did not stop. Draco pursued as quickly as he could, but Potter had a significant head start.

"Potter, stop!"

This only seemed to encourage Potter to increase his pace.

"Blast it, Harry, please stop!" he shouted, barely able to breathe.

Potter stopped.

Draco reached Potter and stood for a moment, catching his breath. Of course now that he had managed to stop Potter, he had no idea what to say. He was frighteningly out of his element. Slytherins did not comfort. It was simply not something that was done. He had an idea that

hugging came into play, but that seemed all wrong. "So sorry you're going to die. Have a hug?" No. Definitely not. He opted instead to stand and do nothing. All things considered, he felt it was going well. Potter was, at least, still there.

"I have no idea what to say." Draco went for the direct approach.

Potter started to laugh.

"You chased me down for that?" Potter was grinning. Draco was becoming rather impressed with himself.

"Well," Draco grinned back. "Yes. Pretty much."

Potter grinned wider. "That's brilliant Malfoy, really."

"Yes, I thought so." Draco felt a hint of the fluttery things returning.

Potter sobered a little. "So are they okay?" He gestured back towards the library.

"Weasley and Granger?"

Potter nodded.

"I guess so," Draco pondered. He hadn't really thought much about them at the time.

"It's not their fault, really," Potter said. "They are working like mad, trying to save me and everyone else, and I'm being an idiot. I have been for weeks." He gave a dry laugh. "They should have bound me up and sent me to Voldemort by now. I'm lucky they're both completely daft." His tone was plainly affectionate.

As difficult an adjustment as it had been for Draco to think of Harry Potter as anything other than a menace to the wizarding world, that was nothing compared to trying to like something about Weasley or Granger. He honestly wasn't certain he could work that out in his head. Ever. He nodded, hoping that would suffice. It seemed to, for now at least.

"Well," Draco glanced in the direction of the library. "Do you want to go back there?"

Potter stood for a minute, and then answered, "No. Not really."

"So what then?" Draco's heart seemed to be beating rather quickly.

The next moment Potter's mouth was on his, and Draco lost track of anything else. When it came to a stop a few minutes later, he was embarrassed to note that he actually whimpered. Potter laughed, took his hand and began to lead him somewhere.

"Why?" Draco managed.

Potter motioned in the direction of the library. "I don't think they could take the shock." He was grinning as he opened the door to the Arithmancy classroom and pulled Draco inside.

"Oh. Right." Draco felt himself flush. His embarrassment was quickly forgotten as the door closed behind him and he was pressed up against it, once again blissfully occupied with the task of kissing Harry Potter.

Draco wasn't sure who first noticed that it was almost curfew, but the knowledge led to hurried last kisses and the hasty straightening of robes. The hurried last kisses had a way of drawing themselves out and leading to more of the same (as well as other things) until one or the other of them broke away mumbling something about how they should go soon. Draco was finding it unpleasant to relinquish the physical contact. Harry seemed reluctant as well, which was a comfort. Draco had grudgingly accepted the fact that "Harry" was now popping into his mind almost as often as "Potter". He suspected that he might have even murmured it a few times during their earlier activities, but Potter was gentleman enough to not point it out.

They emerged from the Arithmancy classroom, faces flushed and robes rumpled, Draco reaching desperately for something to stall the end of the evening.

"Um--" Draco began eloquently, "I could... walk you back to your tower. You know, since it's late." He was aware that this was idiotic, but desperation was a funny thing.

Potter pondered for a moment. "Well, maybe I should walk you back. Nobody bothers me if I'm a bit late for curfew, what with my impending doom and all." He smiled.

Draco replied, "Well, I'm a prefect, so it's really fine for me as well."

"Slytherin's further."

"Right, then."

Draco had complained from time to time about the distance to the Slytherin dungeons from much of the rest of the school, but tonight it seemed much too short. He was enjoying walking next to Potter, savoring the electricity of their hands brushing together, which perhaps was happening more often than was strictly necessary. He was feeling lightheaded and maybe even a little giddy. It was nice. His head was a jumble of assorted confusing entities, but one thing he knew for certain is that he really wanted to keep this. He had no idea what that meant, and for the moment did not care. As they neared the door to the dungeons, he wondered if he should say something.

"Potter-" he began.

He was interrupted by the frantic arrival of Pansy Parkinson, who flew at him from the door.

"Draco! Where have you been all night?" She looked awful. "You have to come in. Now. It's important."

Draco was surprised how quickly his good feeling could desert him. "What is it, Pansy?"

"Not in front of him." She gave Potter a scathing look.

Draco remembered Potter's confrontation with his friends in the library and was ready to do the same, but Potter stopped him.

"It's okay, Malfoy, I was leaving anyway." He gave Draco the slightest of smiles. "Curfew." He turned to leave.

"Curfew, right." Draco felt his stomach falling into his shoes. "Um, Pansy can you give us a minute?"

Pansy stood, eyes wide, unmoving.

"Pansy, please." Draco's throat felt oddly tight. His panic was growing. He needed her to be gone. Now.

Pansy glared once more at the retreating Potter and said, "Fine." It was clearly not fine, but Draco was too anxious to care.

As soon as she was out of sight, Draco turned, walked quickly to Potter, pulled him around by his arm and kissed him urgently, all his panic melting into nothing as the warmth washed over him, turning the kiss slow and soft as his fingers wove through Potter's hair. After a minute or two, he broke away, breathless.

"Goodnight, Harry," he said, and headed into the Slytherin dungeons.

Draco's thoughts were still lingering on Harry when he arrived inside the common room to face Pansy. He only vaguely noted her annoyance at his having taken as long as he did to get there.

"So what's the matter, Pansy?" He tried to sound like he cared. "I'm completely knackered. I should really be off to bed."

Pansy stared. "Draco, what's wrong with you? You've been acting crazy for the past two days, you've been missing all evening, and now you're grinning like a complete idiot and--" Her face turned deadly white. "Draco."

"What?" Now he was worried.

Pansy looked like she was going to be sick. "Look at yourself, Draco," she said slowly.

"What are you talking about?" He walked to the mirror over the fireplace and stared at the reflection. It was Draco Malfoy. It was Draco Malfoy with very disheveled hair, crumpled robes, flushed cheeks and red, swollen lips. It was, quite simply, Draco Malfoy looking very obviously and thoroughly snogged. If not quite a bit more. He felt the imprints of Harry's hands all over him as he looked, and it sent a shiver of pleasure through his body. *Oh.*

"So what?" Draco tried to be casual. "Am I not allowed? I don't whine about you and Zabini getting it on in the Charms classroom every afternoon."

Pansy's voice was thick with contempt. "You were with Potter."

Draco didn't reply.

She sneered. "That's what I thought."

Draco did not know what to say. He thought he would have felt more panic, but he was actually quite calm.

"What of it?"

"I always figured you were a poof," Pansy began, eyes narrowed. "I didn't know you were a traitor as well."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Oh please, Pansy. He might be a bleeding-heart Gryffindor, but I hardly see--"

"He's not our kind, and you know it!" she interrupted. "He'd have us all out of Hogwarts if he could."

Draco was beginning to feel very tired. "Look, did you drag me in here to lecture on my sex life, or did you actually have something important to say?"

"Well," Pansy bristled. "Yes, actually. While you were off fraternizing with the enemy, Crabbe and Goyle have disappeared. Blaise too." with that, her voice shook a bit.

Draco's heart fell. He knew what was happening. Without speaking, he turned and walked to his dormitory. There, waiting for him at his bed, was his father's owl. It looked quite impatient. He stood. It stared. He stood some more. He heard footsteps behind him.

"Draco, what's this about?" It was Pansy, her voice still quavering.

Draco tried to speak, and nothing would come out. The owl still stared at him. He tried to move away from it, but his legs seemed to be frozen. The owl looked triumphant. Draco felt sick. Everything he had seen and heard in the last two days suddenly came together. He knew exactly what the parchment in that owl's beak would tell him. A part of him hoped that if maybe he did not take it, he could make it disappear. The owl did not move. Draco slowly inched forward, still unable to reach for the letter. He closed his eyes for a moment, his father's sneer appearing in front of them as he did so. ... *To think you could save him...*

Pansy touched his arm. "Draco?"

Draco jumped. He turned to her, struggling to calm his breath. Her face was fragile and pale, blue veins peeking through transparent skin. She looked like a child, vulnerable, questioning. He stifled an urge to touch her cheek.

"It's the Death Eaters. They're calling in their own." His own voice sounded dead. "Tonight is very important. They want everyone to be there."

"Why?" She was on the verge of tears.

Draco's throat was completely dry. "Because it's time to kill Harry Potter."

The floor of the corridor was very cold, which Draco appreciated. The coldness of the floor somehow kept him tied to the present--to the reality of the choice he had to make right now. He'd known this day would most likely arrive. What he didn't know is that it would be so soon, or that circumstances would have changed so much as to make the decision so difficult.

He opened the parchment in his hand and read it again. He was directed to proceed to a portkey in Hogsmeade by midnight and join his father and the other Death Eaters for a great ceremony. He and the other young recruits would receive their dark marks and follow the Dark Lord to his final victory over Potter. For Draco, this was his last chance to declare his loyalty to Voldemort. Should he fail to arrive as planned, he would be considered a traitor and dealt with as such upon their next meeting. He doubted he'd be given much choice as to when that meeting might be.

Draco Malfoy was not brave. He knew this. The Gryffindors had frequently called him coward, and he'd retaliated for it, but deep down he knew it was true. He was a coward. He followed whoever was most powerful. He looked out for himself and no one else. This is who he was-- who he was taught to be. He understood fear, manipulation, intimidation. He was a Slytherin. He got what he wanted and didn't much care how. He was not cut out for heroics.

I'm just like my father.

That was a thought that used to make him feel proud, successful. Only in recent years had he realized what that meant. That his father was just like him. Petty, cowardly, drawn to Voldemort for his power. Draco wondered idly if that is what drew him to Potter. He desperately hoped not. *Potter. It all comes down to Potter.*

Harry.

He looked at the parchment again. He didn't understand why Potter was the target and not Dumbledore. He figured it had something to do with this prophecy he'd been hearing about, but it didn't make sense to him. Truth be told, he was feeling rather resentful towards Dumbledore for placing Potter in this kind of danger. What kind of great wizard sends a student to his doom while sitting back in his office twiddling his thumbs? Sure, Potter had gotten lucky in the past, and maybe even had some unique talent for foiling Voldemort--throwing him off his game and whatnot, but shouldn't Hogwarts be concerned with its students' safety above all? Draco felt a complaint was in order. He'd be sure to get around to it as soon as he was finished dying a horrible death at the hands of his own father.

Twenty minutes. He had twenty minutes before it would be too late and his decision would be made for him. Could indecision make you a hero? Failure to act? If he sat here just long enough, it would be too late, and he'd have no choice but to go to Dumbledore, if only to beg for his protection. Not that he had high hopes for Dumbledore's chances there. He knew they'd get him sooner or later. He was no Harry Potter, after all.

Harry. Harry Harry Harry.

And what would it be worth? Would it even save Harry? Would his sacrifice (if it could be called that) even make a difference in the fight? Chances were they already knew anything he could tell them. They were intercepting his owls after all, weren't they? What did he really have to offer? And how great were their odds to begin with? He didn't doubt that Dumbledore was powerful and that he had a number of other decent wizards on his side, but the whole sheep thing hadn't sounded promising. Perhaps they were doomed no matter what he did. Perhaps Harry was doomed. What made Draco think that he had the power to save Harry? And what made saving Harry so important to him?

"You idiotic boy. To think you could save him."

Draco pressed his palms to the floor, trying to soak up as much of the cold as he could. His time was running out. When it did, would he feel terror or relief? Both, perhaps? He closed his eyes, trying to imagine. He still had fifteen minutes, he still could-

"Mister Malfoy?"

He opened his eyes to find long robes towering over him, along with the face that belonged to that voice.

"Professor Dumbledore." His voice was shaking. "H-how did you find me?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Well, you are sitting outside my office, Mister Malfoy. At a very late hour, I might add."

Draco flushed. Right.

"Mister Malfoy, do you, perhaps... have someplace to be?" Dumbledore's tone was kind, his intentions unreadable.

Does he know?

Draco stood up. "I--" he glanced down the hall towards the exit. He could still make it, easily. He was standing. He could just go. Dumbledore wasn't going to stop him. It was now or never.

"Yes. Yes I do." He felt more confident now.

Dumbledore's voice was softer now. "I see. Well then, you should be off, I would imagine." He turned to return to his office.

"Actually, sir," Draco said, heart pounding. "I came to see you."

Dumbledore turned back slowly. His eyes were shining, and he wore a small smile.

"Is that correct, Mister Malfoy?"

Draco nodded. Dumbledore's smile grew. Draco didn't think he'd ever seen him smile so broadly, certainly not at him.

"Follow me, then."

Dumbledore mumbled something towards his door, and led Draco up the stairs.

Sitting in a big chair across from the headmaster of Hogwarts, Draco began to feel what might have been pangs of regret, though he allowed that they might just as easily have been fear. As he watched his last few minutes pass by, he realized that this was it. He had made his decision, and his life, however much was going to be left of it, would never be the same. It was terrifying, and possibly a tiny bit exciting, but he wished Harry was there. He wasn't sure why. He thought it might make it more real, maybe give him an idea of how to proceed from here. Instead, he had Albus Dumbledore, arguably the most powerful wizard in the world, smiling at him and clearly waiting for him to say something.

"Um--" Not a great start, he realized. He placed the parchment from his father on the desk, hoping that might speak for him.

Dumbledore took his eyes from him in order to look at it, giving Draco more confidence to speak.

"You probably already know this. I mean, I know it's probably no help, but--" His confidence was waning. "Well, I didn't know. Anyway, there it is."

Dumbledore looked back up at him. "Why did you bring this to me?"

I want to save Harry. "I--I don't know." Draco's head was beginning to hurt.

Dumbledore studied him for a moment.

"You're right that this information is not new. Your housemates, Crabbe and Goyle, among others, were spotted leaving earlier, and we do have some inside contact." He paused. "You, however, are an entirely new and very interesting development, Mister Malfoy."

"So you did know." This was not helping Draco's head. "You could have stopped me before. Why didn't you? I might have gone." *I should have gone.* "You would have just let me go."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I would have." He leaned forward. "It would not have helped our cause had I forced you to stay. It had to be your choice. We make our own destiny, no matter what your father may have told you."

"Except for Potter." Draco was shocked at his own boldness. "Isn't that right?"

Dumbledore did not respond.

Draco continued, "It's true, isn't it? We all have a choice, but Potter. You and I can fight in the war or- or travel the world or sit home and play exploding snap all day if we want to, but Harry..." He felt his throat catch, swallowed and took a deep breath. "Potter has to march off to his doom because some bloody prophecy says so, isn't that right, Professor?" His head was throbbing now, and his hands shaking. Draco wondered if perhaps this was what it felt like to go mad.

Dumbledore looked as though he'd been struck. Draco fell back into the depths of his chair, wishing he could just go to bed and wake up to find this all a dream.

"It was for Harry." Dumbledore spoke softly, as though only to himself. Then he looked up at Draco. "You did this to help Harry."

Draco stared for a moment and then nodded. "I did this to help Harry." His tension seemed to completely drain away, leaving him limp. "It was for nothing, though, wasn't it? There was nothing new. I haven't helped at all."

Dumbledore seemed distracted. "What? Oh no, I believe you have helped, Mister Malfoy. You have helped a great deal."

Draco didn't understand at all how that could be, but he was too exhausted to argue the point.

"Now, time for you to be off to bed." When Draco opened his mouth to protest, Dumbledore continued, "You will be completely safe tonight, as will Mister Potter. Tomorrow we begin anew."

Draco was quite grateful, he had to admit. "Yes sir." He rose from his chair and started toward the door. He was stopped suddenly by a voice behind him.

"Draco."

Draco turned.

"Either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives."

"Pardon, Professor?"

Dumbledore smiled. "The prophecy. You wished to know, did you not?"

Draco blinked. "Yes. Yes, thank you, Professor." He headed down the stairs and began to make his way back, anxious for the comfort of his bed.

Either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.

The grass was cold under Draco's hands, and he couldn't remember how he got there. His head hurt, and as he sat up to look around, he got the feeling he'd been knocked out. He wondered where anyone else was, and how he'd ended up in Muggle clothes. There was something glowing in the distance--a fire of some kind, perhaps. He stood up, wavering a bit, and walked toward it. He hadn't gone far when he stopped in his tracks. It was a circle of Death Eaters, at least twenty of them, gathered around a fire. Above the fire, suspended in the air, was a man, paralyzed, screaming in pain. The voice was familiar. He walked a little closer, hiding behind a tree. He was sure he knew the man in the air. Just a little closer, he thought, creeping slowly to another tree.

It was Harry.

Then a hand was covering his mouth and pulling him around and he found himself face to face with his father. His heart nearly stopped.

"You idiotic boy," his father sneered. "To think you could save him... a coward like you."

A loud cry went up from the Death Eaters and Draco struggled to break free from his father. He turned his head to see a tall, dark figure walking to the fire. Voldemort. His wand was raised, pointed at Harry. Draco screamed. He felt himself released from his father's arms and fell, head hitting the soft, velvet ground as a voice echoed through the air.

"Avada Kedav-"

Suddenly Draco found himself in his own bed, sweating, sheets tangled around his limbs, heart racing. He panicked for a moment at the silence in the room, and then remembered that he was the only one left in the seventh year boys' dormitory. He wasn't sure he'd ever get used to that, not that he minded just at the moment. As his rapid breathing and heartbeat finally started to calm, he sat up and opened the curtains, grateful for the gust of cold air that hit his face. The dungeon rooms were black at night, two softly glowing orbs at either side of the room the only source of light. Draco waited for his eyes to adjust to the light, and then scooted to the end of his bed, lowering his feet to the soothing cool of the stone floor. He closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. When he opened his eyes again, he was startled by the face of Harry Potter. Draco jumped back with a small yelp.

"Potter," He choked out. "What--how did you--what are you doing here?"

Potter's face was like stone. "I could ask the same of you."

This wasn't getting any less confusing. "I'm-" Draco closed his eyes again for a moment and opened them again. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Potter said, voice tight. "What the hell are you doing here, Malfoy?"

Draco was a bit hurt at his tone, which only led to annoyance. He stood. "This is my bloody bed in my bloody room, Potter. Where else would I be?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Malfoy." Potter was getting louder and talking through clenched teeth.

"No, I really don't, Potter, and I wish you'd get to the point." Draco lifted his chin.

Potter took a few deep breaths and continued. "Most of your housemates have gone. I know you got an owl asking you to join them. So I repeat, Malfoy, why are you here?"

Draco felt some of his old, familiar rage returning, laced with a hurt that was very new to him. They were an exceedingly unpleasant combination. He glared at Potter, lips tight and scowling.

"Why should I tell you anything, Potter? None of it is your business. Why don't you just run and ask your sodding 'intelligence' since they seem to know everything?"

Potter said nothing.

"Well?" Draco was really getting angry.

"I--" Potter had gotten oddly quiet and was looking at his feet. "I made that up. Not the intelligence thing, we do have that, it's just... nobody has been looking at your owls. That part. I made that up."

Draco was stunned. "Why?"

Potter looked up at him. "I had to know. Where you stood. If you... I just had to know."

"Well you should bloody well know by now!" Draco was angry again.

Potter's voice was still quiet. "I want to hear it from you."

Draco raised his eyebrow and sneered. "I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed, Potter."

Potter was losing patience. "Malfoy. WHY ARE YOU HERE?"

Draco studied him for a moment. "If you must know, I got the letter from my father and took it to Dumbledore."

"What?" Potter's face had turned white.

Draco folded his arms in front of him. "You heard me."

Potter looked very strange. "Why?"

"I think you know why."

"Quit being an idiot, Malfoy, and just tell me!" He was almost shouting now.

"I DID IT TO SAVE YOU, YOU STUPID GIT!"

Potter stood, paralyzed.

"Now, leave me in peace, please, Potter." Draco, drained, turned back to his bed. Potter grabbed his arm violently.

"You- can't-" Potter sputtered, almost growling. "You just- you can't just do that. Draco, you-"

"Well it's not like it worked!" Draco shouted. "Dumbledore knew everything already."

"YOU CAN'T SAVE ME!"

Draco felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. "So I've been told."

His eyes were stinging as he tried to turn again. The grip on his arm tightened.

"Harry, you're hurting me."

Potter dropped his arm and stepped back. Draco stepped forward, mind swimming, and pulled Potter's face into a kiss. Potter responded eagerly, pulling Draco closer, deepening the kiss, drawing it out, hands searching urgently, taking him back to the Arithmancy classroom, where their two bodies had been all that had existed in the world, absorbed in the strange intimacy of frustration and release. Then suddenly he pushed Draco back, leaving him gasping.

"No." Potter said. He stared at Draco, looking for a moment like he might reach for him again, then turned, walked toward the door, pulling something over him as he did so, and disappeared.

Draco sat on his bed in a daze. He was angry, confused, hurt--there was too much emotion all at once for him to sort it out. Nothing made sense. He didn't know how to react to things. He felt like he was making everything up as he went. For the first time in his life, he had absolutely no idea what might happen to him in the next minute or the next day. On one hand it was slightly intoxicating. On the other--he thought back to the last hour-- Harry cold and angry, shouting at him one minute, kissing him the next and then gone. It sent a shudder through his body, of pleasure or pain, he honestly could not tell. Nothing was as it seemed anymore. Nothing.

He was obviously not going to get any more sleep, and remembering his dream earlier thought perhaps that was not the worst thing. It was just barely time for the Great Hall to be available for breakfast, so he dressed and headed up, craving light and normalcy.

The latter, it seemed, he was not going to get. When he arrived, it was clear that there was something wrong. The Hall was filled with students, far too many to be at breakfast this early on a Saturday morning. All the staff was gathering as well. Everyone seemed agitated, and the students were oddly quiet, just whispering to each other mostly, and a few might have been crying.

Draco walked quickly to his table. He and Pansy were almost the only seventh year students left, and quite a number of the fifth and sixth years were gone too. She seemed grateful to see him, her eyes red and worn from crying, Blaise Zabini's usual spot next to her looking conspicuously empty. Draco wondered if she wished her parents were Death Eaters so she might have been with Blaise. The thought chilled him. He sat down on the other side of her, careful to avoid Blaise's seat.

"Draco, I thought you weren't coming!" She sounded exhausted and a little shaky.

Draco frowned. "Why? What is this anyway?"

"I don't know. They called us all out of bed, didn't you hear?"

Draco shook his head absently and looked around the room. The Ravenclaw table did not seem completely full, either, he noticed, though Slytherin was by far the most sparse. The Gryffindors were still milling about, most of them not yet sitting. Draco's eyes automatically searched for Harry in the crowd, which annoyed him a little, but he didn't try to stop. There was something especially wrong with the Gryffindors. They all seemed to be clinging to each other and the female Weasley was sobbing openly, folded in the arms of her brother, Granger stroking her hair and whispering to her now and then. Draco thought Potter could not be far.

When he finally found him, he almost wished he hadn't. He was one of the few Gryffindors seated, surrounded by his housemates, but somehow completely alone. His face held no expression at all. He was not responding to anyone who spoke to him, and did not seem aware that they were even there. Draco felt an odd urge to put his arm around him, and felt a rather sharp twinge of jealousy when Neville Longbottom sat down beside him and did exactly that. Harry didn't even seem to notice.

At this point, Draco's gaze was pulled to the front of the room by the voice of Professor Dumbledore. He looked awful. Something terrible had happened that Dumbledore did not expect. Things were, indeed, horribly, horribly wrong.

Draco barely comprehended the information that followed. Dumbledore said something about the war, and how hard they had all worked to keep it outside of Hogwarts. It was important that Hogwarts remain a safe haven for young witches and wizards, no matter what raged outside its walls. But something had gone wrong. They had anticipated an attack, but their information had been false. Instead, with the help of a student, Death Eaters had gained access to the Gryffindor seventh year boys' dormitory early this morning, in an attempt to assassinate Harry Potter. Draco's mind was so muddled, he was having difficulty understanding all the details. He had worked out, however, that Seamus Finnegan had been the traitor in question (having foolishly fallen for a promise of immunity for himself and his family), and had been killed in the struggle, along with several unnamed Death Eaters. Draco thought of the empty spaces around him and wondered if it had been any of them. Dean Thomas had also been killed. He glanced over again at Ginny Weasley, understanding. The Death Eaters, they were told, had not achieved their goal, which was obvious to anyone sitting there. Only Draco knew the real reason why.

Harry had not been there.

Draco turned to look again for Harry, all his anger and confusion replaced by a new pain. He was beginning to understand what it was to be Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived. The Boy Who Lived To Watch Other People Die. He stared at his emotionless face, watched as Longbottom continued his fruitless attempts at comfort, arm around Harry's stiff shoulders, whispered words unheard, strong hand enclosing Harry's limp one. Draco watched and felt his heart ache. He wished he could say or do something to show him that he understood. He wished he could say

anything, and for a moment he thought maybe he had, because just then Harry turned to look at him, his eyes flickering with pain for one moment as they met Draco's, only to be covered once again by the empty glaze that had been there all morning as he turned away. This was followed by a resentful glance from Longbottom, but Draco was too distraught to care.

A few gasps were heard in the room, drawing Draco's attention once more to Professor Dumbledore. He struggled to figure out what he'd missed.

Oh.

They were closing Hogwarts.

"... Your parents have all been notified and most of you will be leaving immediately." Dumbledore paused. Draco thought he looked as though his heart was broken. "This is the saddest day I have known in all my years at this institution. I can only promise you that those of us who remain will put all our effort into making Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry safe once more."

As he sat down, the room broke out with the noise of hundreds of shocked and panicking schoolchildren, only to be silenced again as Professor McGonagall rose from her chair.

"Seventh year students only," she looked pointedly at a few younger Gryffindors and continued, "who wish to join the war effort, please reconvene here in one hour. The rest of you, please pack your essential belongings as quickly as possible. Transportation will be arriving shortly to take you to your parents." She looked for a moment as though she wanted to say more, but then simply nodded and returned to her chair.

The room erupted again, this time children scattering every which way. Draco didn't move, his eyes on Harry. He felt a tugging at his shoulder. It was Pansy.

"Come on Draco." She started to walk away, realized he wasn't with her and turned back. "Draco, we have to pack up, come on!"

Draco blinked and looked at her. "Oh. No," he said. "I'm not going."

"Why?" Her tone was of utter disbelief.

Draco paused, glanced at Harry and then turned back to her. "I have reasons."

Pansy stared. "Draco."

He shook his head and turned back to look at Harry. She waited for a moment, shifting her weight, then turned and ran off toward the dungeons.

The Gryffindor table was dispersing more slowly than the rest. Draco waited, as the younger students extracted themselves from the hugs of older students, finally heading to their tower to

pack. Most of the seventh years stayed behind, reluctant to leave each other, even for the allotted hour. Finally he saw Harry move away from the group, against the obvious wishes of Longbottom in particular, and start toward the corridor. Draco followed and wordlessly fell into step with him. They walked, both of them silent, until they had reached the corridor outside the library. Harry stopped, leaned against the wall, and slid down to the floor. Draco followed suit. He didn't know how long they had been sitting there before Harry finally spoke.

"So I guess you saved me after all." He was staring at his knees, voice barely a whisper.

Draco laughed dryly. "I suppose." He wondered if saving someone by making them angry enough to stalk you counted for much. He sincerely doubted it.

"You're--so you're staying, then?"

"Yes," Draco answered. He paused, and then added, "I... well, I don't have anywhere to go." He felt idiotic. "It's not like--like I'm brave or anything. I'm not." *To think you could save him... a coward like you.* Everything was hopeless. He thought of the group gathered back in the Great Hall. He would never be one of them. They would never trust him, and he wasn't sure they were wrong. "I'm not brave," he repeated.

There was a long pause before Harry answered, so quietly it might have been Draco's imagination.

"Yes you are."

Draco felt a slow, glowing warmth deep in his stomach. Nervously, he moved his arm around Harry's shoulders. He felt Harry tense momentarily, and then relax and lean into him ever so slightly. After a few minutes, Harry began to shake gently and Draco realized he was crying. Draco pulled him a little tighter. The shaking grew more violent, as Harry's sobs became audible and he collapsed into Draco, crying freely.

Draco was stunned. He looked at the boy in his arms. This was Harry Potter, broken, lost in grief, drowning in regret. This was Harry Potter, seeking solace and safety. He thought again of the group in the Great Hall. Those were Harry's friends, the people he trusted and counted on. How could it be that in a room full of stouthearted Gryffindor heroes, Harry Potter sought comfort in the arms of Draco Malfoy? With Harry clinging to him he found he didn't care. Draco wrapped both his arms around Harry as tightly as he could, gently stroking his hair with one hand, and kissed his forehead.

Together they sat for the next hour, Harry crying, Draco holding him, until finally Harry's eyes were dry and swollen and they both stood, without a word, and started back to the Great Hall. As they neared their destination, Draco's stomach began to sicken. This was where it ended. As soon as they entered that room, he would be alone--unexpected, unwanted, despised by most. He didn't belong here. He didn't belong anywhere. Even Harry couldn't change that. The air felt thick and difficult to breathe. He thought of his empty dormitory. Perhaps Dumbledore would

agree to just hide him there. Perhaps he could go back to his room and disappear into the velvet bed-curtains until the war was over, his fate sealed one way or another.

Draco's pace slowed a little, and he fell behind. Harry, noticing, took his hand, leading him the rest of the way. Just before they reached the doors, Harry stopped, squeezed Draco's hand, looking him in the eyes for the first time since the earlier assembly and said,

"Thank you."

It was at this moment, with trust and gratitude radiating from Harry's eyes, that Draco felt for the first time in his life that perhaps he really could be brave. He squeezed Harry's hand in return, hoping that would speak for him, basking for a moment in the comforting pools of green before him. Harry's face was warm, determined, full of hope, just as a hero's should be. Draco tried to mirror it with his own. Harry gave him a flicker of a smile and walked into the Great Hall, ready to be Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived.

Draco Malfoy took a deep breath and followed.

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