

Who Would Have Thought

*A work of Harry Potter
Fanfiction*

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CHAPTER ONE: Vantage Point

Draco Malfoy sat stunned at the words and sounds that surrounded him. He closed his eyes, letting the beat surge through his body as the band a few feet away played on in the otherwise empty room.

He had known Ian Pierce his entire life and the older boy was probably his best friend in the world, though many would have thought them incompatible. However, for him it had not been a surprise when the recent Durmstrang graduate announced that he and some of his old schoolmates were going to take a crack at the Muggle music business. Ian had none of the restraints put on his life as he had and though his mother's side of the family had been close to the Pierces for generations, very few of their views existed within the Malfoy house.

It was for this reason that a thrill of excitement had gone through him when Ian told him the band had their first set up, playing for tips at a Muggle teen hang-out. His friend had then led him to an out of the way part of the Pierce Mansion in order to hear the band for the first time. The pleasure of being there had escalated in the seconds before the band started playing and fairly exploded with the first lyrics.

"Sometimes, I feel the fear of uncertainty stinging clear..."

Draco had been staring at the neatly painted letters on the drum set that made up the band name, Vantage Point, when the first cords floated to him and the words, when they came, were suddenly more powerful than any binding spell he had ever seen

"...and I can't help but ask myself how much I let the fear take the wheel and steer..."

Those words! Those were his words! The poem he had written during last years visit floated back to him from their misplaced grave. He had shown the poem to Ian once, or rather, Ian had read it over his shoulder. The rhythm thrummed through his body as he sat back and watched the band play; too startled to move and too entranced to think.

He watched Ian move. His mouth formed the words as his hands roamed the guitar. A piece of auburn hair swung into his eyes and with a slight twist of his head he flung it away again. One thought finally came to Draco's mind: "Thank Merlin Ian doesn't know all the fears that song represents."

Finally, the last cords of the song melted away; the vibrations in the air smoothed out by the silence between Draco, Ian, and the two other boys in the room, Eric and Kayd.

"I thought I had lost it." Came Draco's only reply to what he had heard.

Ian was suddenly sitting next to him, looking at him worriedly. "You left it here last summer. I found it and..." the boy paused, looking down at the floor with a guilty look as did the now motionless drummer and base player, "...and it was perfect. You know I enjoy your writing and I hoped you wouldn't mind, but if you do you don't have to worry because no one else has heard it yet and..."

"Ian." Draco had never seen his friend so flustered. "I was just surprised. I liked it."

Draco heard the words leave his mouth before he even realized he had spoken and suddenly Ian had him in a hug and Eric and Kayd were hooting in joy as they came crashing in to join the embrace. Draco found himself laughing as the heavy weight of three boys landed on his smaller frame. If only Potter and his followers could see him now. They wouldn't recognize him, that's for sure.

Draco pushed the thought of his Hogwarts adversaries from his mind, unwilling to let that spoil his mood. "You boys aren't going to have many fans if you suffocate them all!" He yelled with a breathless laugh from where his head was tucked against Ian's shoulder. Except for the fact that his body was currently telling him that one wrong move and he would crack a rib, he had absolutely no problem with the heavy weight of his best friends, better friends than he had ever managed at Hogwarts, piled on top of him.

Eventually, they all managed to disentangle themselves and reluctantly, Draco too pulled out of the embrace.

"Ian, don't forget the rest of it." Kayd said seriously.

Draco glanced expectantly at Ian who looked at him almost shyly. He tried to remember if that shy demeanor had been there last summer, but then Ian began to speak.

"We need original material and we want you to write for us. We have a few other songs we put together ourselves, but the one we based off of your poem is by far the best. Will you?"

Even his practice at being the blank Slytherin did not keep the blush from his face. "I don't know. I mean that was just one poem that happened to turn out ok. I don't think..."

"Stop! Draco, I have known you your entire life and if there is one thing you can do better than catch a snitch or brew a potion, it's write." Ian paused to take in the look on his face, which he knew held a look of shock at the outburst. "Just say yes. Give it a try?"

Draco once again beat down the queasy feeling that came along with anything that reminded him of Hogwarts and the fact that he still had one more year to go before he would be rid of it, but if there was something that could banish those thoughts it was writing and Ian. He was silent for a moment as his mind began to sort the ideas being placed before him. His writing. Vantage Point. The only warning that went off in his head screamed, "What will your father say when he finds out!" but that could be easily put away as it had a thousand times before even though he knew chances were he would pay for it later.

When there was no other reprimand from past experience or his conscience, he was able to tell himself that he didn't give a damn what his father thought or did. This was worth it.

"I'll give it a try."

There was more whooping just before the supposedly emotionless Slytherin was once again descended upon. Draco felt the air leave his lungs and laughed anyway. He heard the song- his poem- play over in his head.

"...maybe I should be the one behind the wheel."

Draco felt Ian's arm around him and began to consider his own words.

(The lyrics in Part One came from "Drive" by the band Incubus)

CHAPTER TWO: Reflections

After another hour of talking and planning, the group had finally become aware of the late hour and Kayd and Eric had left for home. Draco watched as Ian stowed away his guitar, his hair flipping slightly forward into his eyes as he did. His friend had always been very laid back in appearance, but those who were close to him knew it was not a reflection of the person he really was. Once Ian set his mind to something, there was never a doubt that he would reach his goal and he would strive for it single-mindedly until then. It was the way he had been brought up and even a first failure never seemed to hamper his enthusiasm.

It was five years ago now that Ian had first discovered Muggle music. He had decided to take up an instrument and picked the guitar. Draco could still remember the first time he had seen it.

"What is it?" He had asked staring at the strange contraption Ian was holding.

"It's a guitar. A Muggle instrument." Ian said proudly, running a hand over the shiny finish.

"Muggle!"

"Yeah, you wanna try it?"

Draco felt his eyes go wide as he stared at something that at any other time and place would be forbidden him. That had been the first day that Ian had given him a lesson on the instrument. He had shown him the major chords and because his friend knew little more than that himself at the time, Draco had felt as if they were learning something together. The guitar was one of the many things that had gone into sealing the bond that had grown between them their entire lives.

Kayd and Eric, having gone to the same wizarding school as Ian, though Eric was a year younger, and having much more access to the enthusiasm of their friend, had also caught the fever. It hadn't been until last summer that they had actually thought of creating a band. Ian and Draco always owled each other regularly during the school year and the letters the Slytherin had received contained little but talk of plans, songs they were trying to write, and places they hoped to be heard.

They had struggled to get themselves organized, but had succeeded. Draco, on the other hand, had an entirely different struggle. He had hoped that Ian's focus on the project would keep him from noticing his lack of comment on his situation at Hogwarts and at home.

Despite the rumors flying, Draco had had little to say as to the events of his sixth year, which was surprising since no one else seemed to talk of anything but. It had been the death of Voldemort after all. Really, little was known about what had actually happened. Just that Potter had lived up to his expectations and set the world free. Most of the wizarding world had rejoiced, but for Draco, it had brought him no relief from his own restraints. If anything, the bindings had only gotten more painful. One thing was for sure: he didn't want to talk about it.

Still, it had hurt when Ian hadn't noticed his silence on the matters that he obviously had access to. The first day at the Pierce Mansion he had been asked about his school year and gotten off with a mumbled "fine" before being pulled off for the annual summer gathering at the large estate. Ian was his best friend and even though he really didn't want to discuss his year, he thought the other boy would have attempted to draw him into a conversation about it at least once. His feelings for Ian were strong and he was shy about them, making this lack of acknowledgement hurt even more.

Draco realized that he had drifted off into his thoughts and looked up as he felt Ian step up behind him. He turned and was caught suddenly by the speculative look in the older boy's eyes.

"I know things have been a little crazy around here the past few days and we haven't had time to really talk, but since we have time now, I thought you could tell me what's been on you're mind."

"What?" Draco found himself squeak.

"Come off it Malfoy." Ian said affectionately as he pulled Draco out of the room. They started out the patio doors at the end of the hall and into the dimly lit garden. "I know something's been bothering you and I have a few ideas as to what it is, but I'd like you to talk to me. And don't pull that "everything is fine" crap with me. I won't buy it."

"I'm sorry, it's just..." Draco trailed off in frustration.

"You know, I heard most people were happy about the fall of He-Who-Is-Now-Ten-Foot-Under, but then I can't be sure since I've never had a Death Eater for a father. Do you want to talk about it?"

He knew what Ian was referring to. The fall of the dark lord had been sudden and many of his followers had been taken down with him. The Ministry was still investigating some of the cases, but the one they had fallen upon the quickest was the connection between his father, Lucius Malfoy, and the Death Eaters. No hard evidence had been found and so the Malfoy family was left alone, but the implications were clear. The family had lost most of the respect it held in the wizarding world and this especially had affected Draco.

"I never wanted to be a Death Eater, Ian. You know that. I just wish the rest of the blasted world knew that."

"Especially the part of the population that occupies Hogwarts, I'm sure. Troubles with Potter again?"

Draco gave a noncommittal shrug, but otherwise did not answer

"I know he's probably making life miserable for you considering your father's little run-in with the Ministry provided all the evidence he needed to support all his assumptions about you." Ian paused to look down at him before turning down a garden path. The dark shrouded them as they conversed and for that, Draco was grateful.

Indeed, Ian was right. After his father had headlined in the Daily prophet as a Death Eater suspect, Potter and his little tag-alongs had found it very easy to throw that knowledge back in his face. Even when he had made the decision to stay out of their way, they were still there throwing accusations.

"Don't bother trying to defend yourself Malfoy, we all know that the only reason you're on the Quidditch team at all is because you're father paid to make sure you got the seeker position."

"Don't worry Hermione, he may have a higher grade than you, but think of all the practice he's had with You-Know-Who as his personal tutor."

"Gee Malfoy, you look a little tired. Up late last night servicing Snape for your potions grade?"

The insults came flooding back to him suddenly along with the glares, anonymous pushes and kicks while in a crowded room, and the laughter behind his back. The tables had turned so quickly and though Draco would adamantly argue that all of Potter's assumptions about him were wrong, there was one thing he could not deny having, and that was his now severely bruised pride.

"Come on Draco. You're my best friend and I don't like seeing you this way, but can you really blame them? I know you really aren't the ass you pretend to be, but they have no way of knowing that your act is really a rebellion against your father. How can they help but take it personally?"

"I know." Draco said softly. "I just really don't want to go back there. Can we not talk about it?"

"If that's what you want. But don't ever forget that I am here." Ian was looking him right in the eye now and the look caused a shiver to run up Draco's spine. A slight nod was his only reply and then Ian was smiling and putting an arm around his shoulder.

"Come on. Let's go for a swim."

CHAPTER THREE: A Beginning

The Pierce Mansion was a mass of muggle technologies. The heated in-ground pool lay around the corner of the house and while the heaters were magically powered, your average muggle might never have known the difference. The hour was late, but not so late that everyone had already gone to bed. Light shined out through the windows of the house creating a golden cast on the water.

Draco paused for just a moment as they reached the far end of the pool, taking in the surroundings he knew so well. He let his gaze wander the outer wall of the old house in front of them until his eyes reached the window of the youngest Pierce's bedroom. Benjamin Pierce had just turned eleven and would be beginning school at Durmstrang that year. Draco wished, not for the first time, that he attended the same school as his friends. Ben was like a little brother to him and he would love to be there for his first year –should be there.

"Is he excited about Durmstrang?" Draco asked, nodding toward the window.

"Bloody nervous is more like it." Ian responded with a chuckle. "He's been over his list of materials a million times making sure he has everything."

Draco laughed too as he remembered how seriously he had taken his own first year. He had spent far more time trying to avoid embarrassment than he did just being an eleven year-old kid, but then he had other things that went into coloring the start of his life at Hogwarts. Ben had no reason for similar hang-ups, but it didn't stop Draco from worrying.

"I'm glad Eric will still be there."

Draco nodded. "I wish I could be."

"I know."

The conversation trailed off and in unspoken agreement they both started to strip down to their boxers to get into the pool. As they got ready to jump into the water, Draco remembered again the day his father had told him he would be going to Hogwarts with the famous Harry Potter. Lucius Malfoy had made it very clear to his son what was wanted of him. He was a Malfoy, which meant he had to be perfect. He was to get the highest grades,

be the most popular, and most importantly, he was to become friends with The Boy Who Lived. From the very start of his first year Draco had done his best to do the exact opposite. Foolish and arrogant in his early days, he had thought that if he got into enough trouble Lucius might reconsider.

It wasn't until that day in Madam Hooch's flying class when he had taken Longbottom's Remembrall that he was informed that getting kicked out of school might not be the wisest choice of action. That piece of advice had come from Snape. The Potions Master was no friend of his and had never given him any respite as far as grades were concerned no matter what the rest of the school thought, but he was the only adult that had tried to see beyond his attitude. For that Snape had his respect.

"Draco, are you ok?" The boy looked up, only then realizing that Ian was already in the water and waiting for him.

"Just thinking," Draco replied with a slight smile as he too got into the water.

Ian smiled back slowly in a way that made Draco forget about his previous concerns. It put him on guard for any mischief his friend might be up to. "You think far too much for summer vacation." Ian began as he came closer. "You should relax. I'm sure you'll find the water very refreshing."

In another instant Draco was dunked underwater as Ian got a firm grip on his shoulders and pushed him down. The moment the hands were gone the Slytherin sputtered to the surface with every intention of retaliating. The next several minutes were filled with splashing and yelling as they fought a small war in the pool. Draco shivered at the feel of Ian's body gliding against his in the water and the way the older boy's muscles shifted as he tried to get a grip on Draco and dunk him again. Soon he was splashing and swimming away not just to defend himself in the water war, but also to keep Ian from getting close enough to discover the effect it was having on him.

Draco often found it odd that as close as they were they had never really talked about sex. One would think that such a conversation would be something of a norm between two hormonal teenage boys, but it simply wasn't. Whatever reason Ian had for not bringing it up was unknown, but Draco had his very own set of reasons for not talking of his desire. It had been in his third year that he had realized he liked boys more than girls and it hadn't been long after when his sights had been set on one particular auburn haired young man.

It was this very thing that kept Draco from giving up as Ian advanced on him. His arms were getting tired and the water was a constant sting in his eyes, but Ian did not seem to be tiring in the least. The Slytherin soon found himself driven to the deep end of the pool, which might have been a good thing since Draco would have more room to maneuver. However, he made a tactical error by turning to see how close Ian was and suddenly he found himself pressed up against the side of the pool with his arms pinned down at his sides.

“Do you surrender?” Ian asked with a wide grin that Draco found himself returning even as he prayed that this friend didn’t lean in any closer.

“This time, but I’ll get you back for this!”

“Planning to take revenge when my back is turned, ah Malfoy? It won’t be so easy.” Ian said laughing.

Draco laughed too and it felt good to be like this. His closed his eyes as his heart rate began slowing down, but he was still barely aware of the coolness of the water around them. Ian’s warm hands still incased his arms and it felt so nice being this close that it took him a moment to realize why it was odd.

It was just as he started to open his eyes that he felt a firm, moist pressure against his lips. The feeling retreated after only a moment and Draco licked his lips at the sudden loss. It took his brain a moment to comprehend what had just happened. Ian had kissed him.

Looking up at his best friend Draco was surprised at the look of embarrassment on the angular face.

“I’m sorry. I probably shouldn’t have done that.” Ian said as he finally let go of Draco’s arms.

It was almost as if someone else was in control of his body as he reached out to take hold of Ian’s shoulders. The older boy looked startled as he was pulled closer, but Draco kept him from speaking by touching their lips together. His lips moved tentatively against his friends and a second later, he was rewarded as Ian embracing him and he was once again pressed against the side of the pool. This time however, he was not worried about what Ian might feel through his boxers because Draco became aware that he could feel something pressing down there too.

Draco was at once grateful and angry that he and Ian had never talked of sex. It was obvious that the older boy had more experience in at least kissing since he was artfully sucking at his lips and running his tongue along his teeth. Draco had never had anyone at school he trusted to experiment with, though Pansy had groped him and kissed him a few times; he had no interest in girls and so had not felt enough for her to get into it.

Ian was taller and stronger than him and made easy work of pressing Draco hard against the side of the pool. Finally he separated their lips and went to work on his captive’s neck.

“I didn’t realize how you felt.” Ian murmured against his skin.

Draco wanted to reply, but found his mouth once more occupied. Ian’s hips were now grinding into his and he found himself clinging to his friend tightly as he didn’t know what else to do. Maybe it was his lack of participation or maybe it was the way Draco was clutching him, but suddenly Ian became still and looked down at the smaller boy in his arms.

“Draco, have you ever...” Ian’s question trailed off, but Draco knew what he was asking and he blushed as he shook his head, embarrassed by his own inexperience.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize." Ian started as he sensed his discomfort. "It's ok that you haven't, just surprising. I would have thought... I mean... I'm sorry, I guess I got a little carried away."

Draco found himself smiling through his heated blush as he watched his normally confident friend become flustered. "It's ok."

"Maybe we should go inside. It's getting cold." Ian said after a moment of silence. Draco had thought for a second that the other boy would back off completely, but then he felt hands moving over his arms where his skin had turned to gooseflesh in the cool air.

Without waiting for an answer, Ian started toward the ladder and Draco found himself eagerly following, feeling a little dazed after what had just happened. He watched as his friend grabbed two towels from the pool house. Ian wrapped one towel around his own body and when he reached Draco didn't bother to hand the other over, but took the liberty of draping it over the other boy himself.

The Slytherin followed as Ian then led him through the side entrance to the house and up the stairs toward the older boy's bedroom. Draco clutched the hand rail to steady himself on the way up. He couldn't really describe how he felt except that it was beyond giddy. He couldn't believe that he had just snogged his best friend and with any luck would end up snogging him again when they got upstairs. This had certainly been an evening full of surprises.

It seemed to him suddenly that the life he was leading now was completely separate from the one he had woken to that morning. He would still have to go back to Hogwarts, still have to deal with Potter and his friends, still get the same looks of disapproval from his father, but somehow it just didn't matter anymore. Maybe all those things that he hated and dreaded before would still be there, but tonight he had chosen something for himself. That, he somehow knew, made all the difference in the world.

CHAPTER FOUR: Something to Look Forward to

By midmorning the light outside had finally managed to penetrate the curtains and shine into Draco's face, bringing him to the surface of consciousness. Not moving to block the glare or even to open his eyes, the blond remained perfectly still, reveling in the feel of the linen wrapped around his bare hips and the familiar smell on the pillow under his head. It smelled like Ian.

His smile alone betrayed the fact that he was awake. It had not been unusual when they were much younger for Draco to spend the night in Ian's room, but it had not felt as good back then as it did now. For the past several nights this had been his bed. It had felt odd at first to have someone hold him in his sleep, kiss him and caress him, but it had left a

warm, swelling sensation in his chest. It was like he was about to fly apart at the seems while still feeling more relaxed and himself than he could ever remember. Draco never knew such a contradiction could feel so good. In the end, when he focused on these feelings it all translated to him holding Ian a bit tighter.

He remembered that first night after they had left the pool. They had spent most of it just touching and kissing. Ian's hands had traveled his body slowly, afraid of making him uncomfortable, and then he had been invited to return the exploration.

"Anywhere." Ian had said as Draco's hands moved hesitantly over him.

He had been encouraged by the way his touch made the other boy's breath come fast and loud. His hands caressed arms and shoulders, his fingers counted ribs and brushed gently over hard nipples. His hands had lingered on Ian's stomach, as he wasn't sure where to go next. Finally, he let his palms glide over the ridge of hipbones and down to muscular thighs. He felt Ian shaking under his hands and suddenly found his wrist caught in a firm grip.

Draco was pulled up alongside his friend, no, his lover and he was kissed as he felt his hand guided downward. He knew in his mind the road his hand was traveling, but he could not keep from gasping into Ian's mouth as his hand made contact with firm, silky flesh. It took a second to fully register exactly what forbidden treasure he was touching, but then it was there before him in flashing red lights like the ones that shone in muggle London at night: he was touching Ian's penis.

Ian pulled away from the kiss to look at him and that's when he realized that he was shaking, but he didn't move his hand away. Instead he slowly let his fingers wrap more firmly around this new territory. He let his thumb rub gently as he felt again the texture of the skin there. Ian's breath hitched and his arms pulled Draco closer. Realizing exactly the effect he was having on the other boy gave fuel to his own fire and this time Draco was the one to initiate the kiss as he continued to move his hand.

He barely noticed as one of Ian's hands left him for a moment, but it was a little harder to ignore when it returned. He felt his own penis caught in a firm grip and shuddered at the sensation. He had touched himself plenty of times, but it had never felt like this. Before when he had pleased himself, his release had been the focus and getting there had been nothing but the frantic movement of his hand to reach that goal. This was different. Draco found Ian's hand confident on his flesh in a way that disconnected him from everything but the sensation of skin on skin. His climax was no longer the only focus here. The feeling of Ian's hands on his body was addicting and though he knew it had to eventually, he did not want it to stop.

His own hand moved almost without thought now as he reciprocated and he kissed his lover frantically in a way he hadn't since this had started. After a while it became a question of kissing or breathing because both were no longer possible at the same time and

since breathing was necessary in continuing other activities, it finally won out. Ian's free arm held him tightly as he gasped his passion into his shoulder.

When his climax came upon him it was sudden. He felt his muscles clench at the same time as he felt the explosion in his balls. He shuddered violently for many minutes afterward and was aware of Ian vibrating under him as well, but it wasn't until he came back down from his trip into euphoria that he noticed the wetness on his own hand.

His lover was holding him and kissing his neck when he finally gained full control of himself. Draco returned the light touches and held Ian tightly to him as his mind caught up with what they had just done together and how it made him feel. By the way he was clutched tightly as they had fallen asleep that night, he knew Ian felt the same way.

Despite the fact that he was ignoring it and thinking on more pleasant things, the light on the other side of his eyelids was not going away. Both he and Ian had thought it best to wait before announcing their new relationship to their parents, who would no doubt prohibit them from sleeping together. Even Kayd and Eric, were oblivious. If that were to remain the case, getting up would probably be the best choice of action.

He sent that message out to his warm and relaxed limbs but to no avail. They really didn't want to move and to be honest, neither did he. Maybe five minutes. Yes, five minutes more and then he would most definitely get up. That decision made, Draco began to scoot toward Ian's side of the bed, searching for his warmth. After several inches without running into so much as a hand, he frowned and flung out an arm in search. Encountering only an empty pillow, his eyes flew open to glare down at the empty bedding as if the sheets themselves had planned it on purpose.

The sound of the door opening cut short his death glare at the empty bed. He sat up just in time to see Ian enter the room dressed for the day and his hair still damp from the shower.

"Look who's finally awake."

In reply Draco let himself fall back on the bed and turned his head into the pillows. He heard Ian chuckle and a second later the bed dipped as he sat down.

"Wakie, Wakie," came the voice close to his ear. "I think someone was a bad boy and stayed up past his bedtime last night."

Draco found himself laughing into the pillow despite the urge he had to tackle Ian. He turned his head back to the other boy. "Well, whose fault was that?"

Ian smirked at his tone of voice. "Since you're reminding me, I think I can safely say you were a very, very bad boy last night."

The teasing was halted as Ian kissed him. Yes, last night had been wonderful, as had the entire week before. Despite his inexperience and his fear because of it, Draco was finding his passion for this physical connection growing rapidly. Yet, things had not escalated much past what they had done that first night. The morning after the sudden shift

in their relationship, the awkwardness of waking up in each other's arms had given way to a talk about any experience either of them had. Ian had admitted to having done this before, but he hadn't gone further. If they were to go beyond this, it would be uncharted territory for the both of them.

They had, however, gotten very good at giving each other pleasure and showing the other what they needed. Right now, Draco needed Ian back in bed with him and he demonstrated that by pulling the other boy down on top of him and tugging his shirt out from where it was neatly tucked into his pants.

"I think I've created a monster." Ian said with a kiss to his cheek, but he reached to still Draco's hand as well. "It's getting late and we have work to do."

Draco sighed theatrically and was placated with another kiss. "Alright, I'll get up." He made a show of sitting up and slowly pulling back the sheets from his otherwise naked body. He heard Ian groan and turn away and suddenly felt very pleased with himself. Draco knew he wasn't ugly, but the reaction he always managed to get out of his lover did much to feed his ego. He made no rush in pulling on his pajama pants from the night before.

"Take a shower and I'll go get Kayd and Eric. Our mom's are out, but breakfast is in the kitchen." Ian came to him now that he was covered and kissed him. Once they left the room it would be hands off between them so they both let this final contact linger.

"I'll meet you in the practice room." Draco said as he pulled away and moved toward the bathroom and Ian gave him a nod and a smile as he headed for the door.



"Morning Ben." Draco called as he entered the kitchen. Ben gave only a nod in reply. His detachment was completely uncharacteristic of his usual personality, but Draco could hardly blame him for his bad mood. Just the day before, Ben had learned that his best friend would not be going to Durmstrang with him. Instead, Harper Skelly, the little girl who had been Ben's shadow for years, would attend Hogwarts. Just remembering her parents' reasoning made his anger rise.

Apparently, the lingering danger of the Death Eaters, despite the death of their leader, had made them look for the safest place for their daughter to go to school. That alone Draco did not have a problem with. What made his blood boil was the fact that they had decided that their daughter would be best off at Hogwarts where the very person responsible for defeating the Dark Lord was being schooled. Never mind the fact that Durmstrang took the same protective measures for their students as Hogwarts, or that it was accredited with a much more stable DADA department, no, so long as their daughter was near the famous Harry Potter she would be safe. It made Draco want to throw something.

Two more people were going to be made miserable because of Harry Potter. If Draco was honest with himself he knew it wasn't actually Potter's fault, but the anger he felt wouldn't allow him to admit it. Ben was being pulled away from his best friend and it was too reminiscent of his own situation when he had been eleven for him to worry about misplaced emotions. He silently promised himself one good poke at Potter and his friends when he got back to school.

With an effort, Draco pushed his frustration aside and went to work trying to figure out how to talk to Ben. The boy was like a little brother to him in everything but blood and he wasn't going to stand around and watch him suffer. He sat down across from Ben and tried to think of where to start.

"Are you going to be doing anything with Harper today? I don't think Ian would mind if you two wanted to watch while we practiced."

"I don't know. We aren't really getting along right now." Ben replied, still pushing his food around on his plate.

"Just because she's going to a different school, it doesn't mean that you can't still be friends. I know you're upset about it, but it isn't her fault."

"It's not so much that. I know this sounds silly, but... I guess I'm kind of jealous."

Draco was stunned. "Jealous. As in, you are jealous because she gets to go to Hogwarts and you don't?"

Ben shrugged, "Ian keeps telling me about everything at Durmstrang. He talks about his favorite classes and his favorite teachers. He talks about how often his Quidditch team won and about his friends in different years and how they are all looking forward to meeting Ian Pierce's little brother."

Suddenly it dawned on him exactly what Ben was getting at. "You know that Ian didn't mean..."

Ben sighed and cut him off. "I know he didn't mean it that way, but that isn't going to keep the rest of the school from expecting me to be just like my perfect big brother who was the Quidditch captain and had top marks for his year."

"I see. Ian has left some pretty high standards for you to live up to." Draco said quietly. He knew that Ben had nothing to worry about, but he couldn't really blame him. He knew what it was like to fall into the shadows of someone else's reputation, namely his father's, though he really hadn't done much to prove anyone wrong either. "Have you talked to Ian about this?"

"And make him feel guilty? No. Though I suppose I should go talk to Harper. I was a bit snappy with her." Draco was again struck with the realization of just how miserable Ben looked. "It's just that I thought that if she was there with me it wouldn't be so bad, but now she won't be."

“If you don’t want to talk to Ian about this, maybe you should talk to your parents.” Draco couldn’t believe the idea that was forming in his head, but it was there and what was worse he knew it probably wouldn’t be much trouble to pull it off. “You know your mother did go to Hogwarts.”

Ben looked at him oddly for a moment before he caught on. “But Dad...”

“... Is very proud of Durmstrang, but you know he would be willing to at least listen and both of our mothers are fond of Hogwarts. You could at least give it a try.” Draco couldn’t believe he was actually encouraging someone to go to Hogwarts, but Ben seemed to have brightened at the idea.

Still seeming a bit stunned at how simple it seemed, Ben got up and headed for the door. The boy was small for his age making the long, quick strides he used to cross the room look awkward for his small frame. He stopped before leaving the room. “Thanks Draco. I’ll go find Dad... um, you won’t tell Ian what I said about...” Ben trailed off nervously.

“About what?” Draco replied in an innocent tone, making it clear that Ben’s words about not wanting to live in his brother’s wake had already been forgotten.

Ben smiled his usual ear-to-ear grin and Draco decided that today was a very good day. The boy left the room and he was left to face what he had just sparked. He hoped he hadn’t made the wrong decision by lighting that hope for Ben, but no matter which way he looked at it, there really didn’t seem to be a bad side. Holden and Kate Pierce had never had many restrictions for their children except for the fact that they were to take full responsibility for any decisions they made. If Ben were sincere enough when he brought it up, which Draco knew he would be, then Holden would do little to dissuade him and Kate would probably be ecstatic that one of her son’s would be going to her old school.

The only real reason Draco was questioning himself had to do with his own experience at Hogwarts, which he knew should be ignored. Besides, that was outweighed by the fact that Ben would be going to school with him. Having someone there that he didn’t have to hide from would make his seventh year almost pleasant... wouldn’t it? He hoped so.

Finally satisfied with his bit of meddling, he got up to get breakfast before Ian came looking for him. He reached for a muffin and quickly swallowed it down. A feeling of contentment washed over him as he left the kitchen to head for the room where the band was waiting. For the first time in a long time, Draco was actually looking forward to whatever life next chose to throw his way.

CHAPTER FIVE: Of Music and Politics

Draco sat in his customary seat on the other side of the room as the band played. A small table with scattered papers sat in front of him. Sometimes he would follow along with

the lyrics and hastily scribbled musical notes that were in front of him, but right now he was just listening and watching. In Draco's opinion they all looked great and somehow the connection they shared as friends had lent itself to their musical ideas and abilities. Even the sketchiest of ideas suggested by any of them would easily be snatched up by the others, smoothed out, and in the next instant Draco would find himself listening to things he never would have thought he and his friends could possibly produce.

It wasn't until the music suddenly stopped that Draco realized he had drifted off. He looked up to see Ian rubbing his brow wearily. Eric and Kayd didn't look much better. Since their first gig last week they had been working harder than ever. That setup had led to two more and the dates were fast approaching.

"I don't know, something just isn't right with this," Kayd spoke as he tossed his drumsticks on the table and sat on the couch against the wall.

Eric plopped down next to him, "We are so missing something with this song. Like it's just waiting to be great if we could just get it right."

They had been working on the current song on and off for weeks, but no matter how often they stopped to brainstorm, changing a cord here or a word there, it just never seemed to be enough. Yet, despite their failure to get it to where they wanted they always seemed to come right back to it.

"I know the problem," Ian stated as he sat on the table and looked directly at Draco. "The problem is that you aren't up there with us."

"Ian, we've talked about this," Draco said.

"But this is your music Draco. You're responsible for creating this just as much if not more than we are. It just doesn't seem right that we stand there and play without you," Kayd joined in.

Without missing a beat Eric added, "And so what if you can't play an instrument as well as the rest of us. You can practice and we all damn well know you can sing."

It was Draco's turn to sigh and rub his temples as they started in on the same discussion they had had several times before, "What you all seem to keep forgetting is that no matter how well I play or sing I won't do you any good from my dorm room at Hogwarts."

"I'll still be at Durmstrang," Eric countered.

"Yes, but your parents think your being in a band is cute. You already have permission to return home every weekend to practice. My father would put his foot down at letting me leave school for this." As before, Draco's reminder was enough to halt the argument.

They sat silently for a moment before Ian reached out to clasp Draco's shoulder and said quietly, "It's only one more year and after that we WILL have you up there with us. Do you hear me Draco Malfoy?"

Draco couldn't help smile up at Ian, "Yes I hear you, but until then this will be my seat. Got it?"

Ian smiled back, "Absolutely."

It was only as Ian moved away that Draco saw Kayd and Eric exchange a look. Ian and he had talked about telling their friends about their relationship, but it looked as if the two other boys might already be catching on. Before Draco could contemplate this any further, an Owl swooped into the room from an open window and with a graceful flutter the bird settled itself on the table and held its leg out obediently.

"It's from my father," Draco said absently, unaware of the frown that had automatically settled itself across his face.

"Maybe we should call it a day mates," Ian suggested. Kayd and Eric nodded in understanding before waving goodbye and heading for the door. Draco noticed none of this as he read his letter.

My Son Draco,

While I am sure you are enjoying your holiday, I feel it important that we spend some time as a family before the summer is over. On the 20th of August I am planning a small party at the Manor, which I am sure you and your mother will find amusing. You will return home on the 15th in order to get ready for the school year and to prepare for the festivities. The Pierce's are invited and their invitation has been sent in a separate letter to your mother.

Your Father

"What does he want?" Ian finally asked.

Draco gave a bitter laugh, "He wants to play happy families in front of prominent wizarding society, what else? I have to go home on the 15th because he's throwing a party. You're invited by the way."

"With an invitation like that how could I refuse," Ian said sarcastically.

Draco stood up and put his arms around Ian's waist before burying his face in the taller boy's shoulder, "I'm sorry. I didn't want this summer to end. Now it's ending too soon."

Ian returned the embrace, pulling Draco tightly to him, "It's your last year Draco. After that you'll never have to worry again. Never again."



Lucius Malfoy stood in his small potions lab examining a half empty bottle. This was quite possibly the last even remotely questionable item that he owned, or at least that

would remain in his home. The Ministry had to be stupid to think he wouldn't completely dissect his own home in search of any and all illegal magical items and then have them disposed off promptly. He had received a conditional release from the Ministry because there had not been enough evidence to convict him. If at any time evidence became available, he would have a one-way ticket to Azkaban, but not if he had anything to say about it.

The liquid in the glass bottle was crystal clear and had the affect of camouflaging itself to any surface it came into contact with. It was called lokus oil and its primary use before it was banned had been in the making of invisibility cloaks and potions. It had other uses though, depending on what base ingredients it was mixed with. It could be used for weight lose, fertility, even mild to sever headaches. It had been banned because research was quickly coming up with too many uses for a substance that was almost impossible to trace and could be absorbed through the skin. While there was still no actual dark use for lokus it had been banned just in case. Stupid fools.

Lucius quickly poured a small amount into a glass already containing a standard headache potion. The lokus would help the potion work faster and longer. Merlin himself couldn't force him to give up this ingredient even if the ministry hadn't re-legalized its use. Headaches were nearly a constant in his life in the past year but with any luck everything would soon improve.

A few short weeks from now, roughly twenty-five well-respected families would be welcomed here and be given free run to explore any and all parts of the Manor. No doubt all the ministry officials attending would tell their wives and daughters to snoop around as much as they could. That would do just fine. Lucius wanted them to snoop. They would find nothing more incriminating than a half empty bottle of lokus.

To top it off, Lucius would present a picture of his happy family as well as the Malfoy's close family friends the Pierce's who were known to have an even better grasp on the lives of muggles than even Arthur Weasley, who was also invited. Lucius intended to introduce Weasley to Holden Pierce very early in the evening. The only hitch in the plan would be his son and especially his wife who had in past years spent more time at the Pierce Estate than at her supposed home. She would suspect what he was up to as soon as she received his letter. He expected a howler would be arriving at any time now.

Even Lucius couldn't understand why Narcissia hadn't gone to the ministry to turn him in herself. She had made it clear to him that as long as he was kept the company of 'those filthy Death Eaters,' she would see too it that Draco got none of his influence. She had made that promise at the end of their son's fourth year and had kept is staunchly ever since. Sure, he still had legal authority over his son and Narcissia could not stop him from sending Draco letters, but the time he actually had to see the boy had been minimal at best.

It was as Lucius gulped down the strong headache remedy that he heard footsteps on the stairs. He looked up to see the pudgy face of Sam Bots, a clumsy oaf of a man who he had hired to help him, peering around the corner.

“What is it Bots?”

“Sir, I saw the Ministers carriage approaching the house. I thought you’d want to be prepared,” Bots got out, thankfully without stuttering like he did most of his sentences.

“Have the house elves get the door. I will be up momentarily. Make yourself scarce,” Lucius barely took notice as Bots fumbled his way back up the stairs. He was already pouring another dose of headache potion. He had a feeling he would need it. The Minister visiting before the party was not something he had expected and irritation at his plan not going exactly as he wanted caused Lucius to slam the bottle of Iokus down a little more sharply than he had intended. It was all right though. All darks artifacts had been removed. There was nothing to worry about.

Lucius fixed his robes and set a pleasant look on his face before turning to head up the stairs. He never noticed the crack in the bottle or the contents slowly beading on the outside of the glass before sliding down to the table, starting a slowly growing invisible puddle.

CHAPTER SIX: London Pubs and New Acquaintances

“You’re Harry Potter!”

Harry barely caught the words, not only because of the noise, but also because a muggle pub was the last place he expected to be recognized. Surprisingly, it had been Hermione who had suggested they come here for a drink to celebrate his birthday. With the help of Sirius, she had even managed to get some fake muggle IDs. “It’s only one more year before you can drink legally anyway,” Hermione had said, “and besides, it will be the perfect way for you to have some fun without being bothered.” She had obviously been mistaken.

Harry’s hand was grabbed and quickly shaken. “Hi, I’m Will. Wow, I have to say I never expected to run into you here. Do you come here often?” Will spoke excitedly, in a way that made it obvious he was used to conversations in the middle of such noise.

“No, I’m just here with some friends.”

Harry had to work to keep the frustration out of his voice. The boy, Will, seemed nice enough, but in the end all conversations apart from those with his close friends or his Godfather came to the same thing. Just for one twenty-four hour period he wanted to avoid the all-consuming question: “Did you really defeat the Dark Lord?” It had been a year since

Voldemort had finally been vanquished, for Merlin's sake, couldn't people just leave him alone?

For all that he felt, Harry still managed to keep a pleasant expression on his face. He had found that the more you tried to avoid people and their questions the more they refused to leave you alone.

"Harry! We found a table!"

A wave of relief came as Ron stepped up beside him. "Sorry, I have to go, nice meeting..."

Harry's hopes of escape vanished as Will interrupted. "Hey, mind if I sit with you guys? The place is packed tonight and there's a really great band playing. Wait till you hear, they're awesome!"

Ron looked worriedly at Harry, but The Boy Who Lived just shrugged in reply before following his friend back to the table where Hermione was already waiting. The table was up some stairs and set in front of a window-like opening in the wall that overlooked the bar and allowed a view of a small, platform stage. Will happily took a seat, seeming to absorb the energy of the people around him.

"Who's this?" Hermione asked as they all got settled.

Will didn't wait to be introduced, "Hi, the names Will. I ran into Harry here a few minutes ago and when I heard you all had a table I thought I'd come join you. I take it you all go to Hogwarts? I'm a Durmstrang student myself. Graduated last year. Went to school with the members of the band here tonight. They're great, let me tell you."

Ron, who was still having a hard time getting used to the muggle world despite Hermione and Harry's influence, got an odd look on his face. He had nothing against muggles, but he didn't understand why some Wizards chose to spend so much time in their more complicated world when magic made things so much easier. "Why is a band of wizards playing here?"

Will just laughed at the question and seemed about to reply when the band came the lit platform. "Hey, here they are now! Just watch, they played here last week too and they blew everyone away!"

Harry followed the movement of the men now on stage as they made their adjustments to the instruments already in place. There appeared to be no difference between them and any of the other local bands whose pictures decorated the walls amid football and rugby paraphernalia. Unlike Ron, these wizards were completely at ease in the muggle crowd.

One of the boys stuck out from the rest. He had wispy blond hair that erupted to gleaming silver in the bright lights. Harry was too far away to really get a look at him, but sitting where he was he had to say that the boy looked a lot like Draco Malfoy. He laughed to himself at the thought, knowing it was simply the bright blond hair that influenced the

likeness. The blond finished fiddling with something or other and gave the three other guys a thumb up. They smiled at him as he made his way off stage to stand by someone who could have been the manager of the pub.

Will started up again, "That one there is Ian Pierce, he was the captain of our Quidditch team. The other two are Kayd McMillan and Eric Crofton. They've been friends for ages and have been working on putting this band together all year. The other guy, I can't remember his name, he was on stage a second ago, blond hair, you saw him. He didn't go to Durmstrang, but I hear he's Ian's best friend, maybe a bit more from what Kayd said, if you know what I mean."

A wink followed the comment and Harry had to fight back a blush. It hadn't been until last year, after all the Voldemort mess was over with, that he had actually realized he had a thing for other boys. By default, he had always just assumed he liked girls, but he had since made some stunning revelations about himself. His friends and Sirius, his godfather, had all taken the news that he was gay (to put it in muggle terms) very well. They had given him their acceptance and gentle encouragement, but he found he was still getting used to the idea himself. Even if the war was over, he still couldn't seem to wrap his mind around the fact that he could start moving on with his life. Harry just wanted to let it go, but how could he constantly had to remind himself that the past year hadn't been a dream?

Will, who had not noticed Harry's discomfort, was still talking: "... he and Ian have been working on the music most of the summer. Oh, wait, I think they're about to start." Will put a finger to his lips in a signal to quiet down as if it had been them who had jabbered on for the past five minutes.

Harry was slightly annoyed, but really didn't mind that much. At least with Will he had no explaining to do and no awkward questions. He didn't know much about music, muggle or otherwise, so Harry didn't know what to expect, but if the other boy was correct in his assessment of his friends' talents then this evening might turn out to be pleasant after all.

There was a short introduction of the band a moment later, made by the same man Harry had earlier assumed was the manager. The band's name was Vantage Point and the manager seemed to uphold Will's opinion of the group. Shortly after, the band started off with an upbeat piece that had people gathering around the base of the platform and trying to move with the beat, though there really didn't look to be much room. Soon enough, Will excused himself with a slight nod to go join in the excitement.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione spent a few moments simply listening to the music. The band had a nice beat and the lyrics seemed pleasant enough. Back when Harry had lived with the Dursleys, his cousin Dudley had had a collection of CDs he played obsessively, but most of had not been to his taste. Harry had found the violent lyrics disturbing and thankfully enough so had Aunt Petunia. She had put her foot down for once with her spoiled son and for that, Harry could not be more grateful.

The table they had chosen was far enough away so that they could still hold a conversation. Hermione went to get them each a drink and when she got back they let the noise of the band settle into the background as they talked about the upcoming school year.

“Harry, what have you heard about this new period that will be required this year? It doesn’t seem very academic,” Hermione said, leaning in to be heard.

Harry shrugged, “I don’t know much. All I’ve heard from Sirius is that it’s to help inter-house relations, but I get the feeling its purpose is more to help keep tabs on any students with dark relations.”

“Dad said the Board of Governors was talking about closing Slytherin House. You know, break them up by taking their den away, but Dumbledore wouldn’t have it,” Ron added.

Hermione nodded, “Well it would be ridiculous to get rid of the entire house. I mean, sure the Slytherins are nasty but not all of them are connected to the Death Eaters. It wouldn’t be fair to punish them all.”

Before long they had finished with their first drinks and Hermione went to get them a refill, though promising it would be the last one. When she left, Harry tuned back into the music that was still playing. The band’s set couldn’t last much longer and it might be nice to at least pay attention to the last song or two. Just as Hermione returned, the music changed to something a bit softer and by unspoken agreement their table remained quiet as the first verse began, but it wasn’t until the chorus that the song really began to catch Harry’s attention.

“... This is the time when all things old will pass Inertia comes around To push me closer than I've ever been Were new things will be found This is my chance to let go of the past at last...”

Somehow the words of that song, out of all the others, seemed to catch and hold Harry’s attention. Even the music suddenly seemed to thrum through his veins and as the final cords of the song sputtered out, Harry found himself wanting to hear it again. He replayed the chorus in his head, wanting to memorize it, but within a few seconds of the song’s end a voice broke into his concentration.

“They were great weren’t they?!” Will said upon his return. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to them. They’re some great guys. Man I can’t wait to tell them how awesome they did!”

Hermione and Ron shared a look as if to decide which one of them would dare break into the other boys monologue to refuse the invitation, but Harry spoke up first, “Sure Will, lead us to them.”

Ignoring the questioning looks of his friends, Harry followed Will to the stage, glad that the noise of the other pub dwellers seemed to drown out Will's commentary on the finer points of his friends' band. It took some pushing and shoving, and Harry was aware that Ron and Hermione were trailing along as best they could, but eventually they made it to the platform where the band was starting to store their gear.

"Hey guys," Will said hopping up on stage without hesitation, "look who I found in here tonight. Harry Potter!"

The three young men suddenly turned to look at him and Harry had to fight to keep from blushing. He hated being called to attention, but then he had practically asked for it this time.

"Hi, I just wanted to let you know I enjoyed listening to you, especially that last song," Harry said, trying to project his voice up onto the stage.

None of the band members seemed to react for a moment and then the one who was Ian shared a look with the other two, Eric and Kayd, before turning back to him, "Thanks, we've been working hard all summer. My best friend writes most of the lyrics. I'll give him your compliment."

"And where is this friend of yours Ian? I want to meet him!" Will piped in.

Ian was silent for a second before peering past Harry, as well as Ron and Hermione who had finally managed to join him. Harry turned his head to see what Ian was looking at, but he only caught a glimpse of blond hair disappearing into the back of the pub.

"I don't think he's feeling well. I better go check on him," Ian finally said as he jumped down from the platform. It was only as Ian finally stood next to him and away from all the annoyingly bright lights that Harry got a good look at the tall, auburn-haired boy. Harry felt his temperature go up a degree or two and a small flutter in his stomach as he took in the longish, yet neat hair and wiry build. Will had already implied that Ian was involved with someone else and so Harry silently chided himself for his reaction.

"It was nice to meet you Harry," Ian said, pausing to look at him for only a moment before beginning to edge his way through the crowd.

Harry was silent as his friend exchanged pleasantries with the other two boys before Hermione said that they had better let the band get back to what they were doing. A few moments later, the trio was leaving and heading to a small restaurant where they had planned to get a snack and some coffee. Hermione kept shooting him questioning looks, but Harry just smiled even as the chorus from that last song continued to play over and over through his head.

(The lyrics in this chapter come from the song "Inertia" by the band The Exies)

CHAPTER SEVEN: Parties, Potions, and Hanky Panky

'I hate smiling,' Draco thought as he bowed to yet another guest Lucius was introducing to his 'family'. This little Malfoy gathering was exactly like every other politically based party that the manor had ever hosted: the food was elegant, the guests were snobbishly reserved, and the proceedings were boring. The only difference was the tension that seemed to surround the entire affair and the number of snooping woman. It was like they expected to look under a vase and find death eaters hiding under it. Draco had even seen a woman stumble out of his own bedroom. The embarrassed lady had insisted she had been looking for the lavatory, but her blush and a few random out-of-place items told the truth.

The only thing that made the ordeal even remotely bearable was Ian and his family. Draco and his mother had left them only a few days before but after only a day Narcissia was commenting on her son's sad face. Even the short separation from Ian had felt almost physically painful and it was all Draco could do to keep himself from latching onto him the moment he arrived. He didn't know what he would do when school started but he wasn't looking forward to it. Luckily, it had been arranging for the Pierces to stay the night.

Draco forced himself to mingle with the rest of the guests. He even managed to focus enough to have a conversation with one man on the collections of books in the Malfoy library, but no matter what, his thoughts always floated back to his plans for later in the evening. That last night before he had left the Pierce residence, he and Ian had crossed a line in their exploration of each other. Draco tried not to fidget as he recalled the feeling of Ian's fingers inside him. Their lovemaking had slowly become more serious over the months and Draco felt he could safely say he had had his mouth on nearly every inch of his lover's body and vice versa but penetration had been something they had avoided until that night.

In the past few days that was all Draco could think about and it had made him seriously look at his feeling for Ian and how committed they were becoming to each other. It had taken what seemed like an enormous amount of energy to come to a very simple and obvious conclusion: he was in love with his best friend. Maybe he was being silly and more romantic than most Malfoy's were given credit for, but it hadn't taken long after that for Draco to decide that he wanted to tell Ian how he felt and show him tonight in the most intimate way possible.

Ian had no idea yet, but Draco had already gotten some lubricant from a discreet shop in Diagon Alley and had made sure there were clean sheets on his bed and scented

candles readily at hand. Now all he had to do was wait. Unfortunately, patience had never been one of his virtues.

Draco forced himself back to the here and now and took a sweeping glance of the room. His father was acting the gracious host, his mother and Kate Pierce were chatting with a small group of ladies in the far corner, Holden was talking with a very animated Arthur Weasley, Kayd and Eric were flirting with some slightly older women, and Ian was nearby with Molly Weasley as she declared he was far too skinny. Draco had been surprised when the Weasley's had shown up and glad they had chosen to leave their children at home. Arthur had managed to make his way up in the Ministry since the war and it was actually refreshing to hear him chat on about muggle technology while his wife mothered anyone even five years her junior instead of all the gossip and commentaries on the decorating.

Finally, Draco caught sight of poor Ben who stood at the desert table, sampling items as often as was appropriate. They had all already dined but the fair had been light and limited to items that were quick to impress those interested in signs of wealth, but had done little to satisfy the palette or the stomach of a growing eleven year old boy. Taking pity on him, Draco signaled a house elf. A brief whispered conversation had the elf eagerly heading off to deliver some snacks to the study down the hall. With that, Draco made his way over to Ben and instructed him to slowly make his way out of the party.

"Where are we going?" Ben asked.

"To get some real food," Draco replied. When Ben blushed, realizing his actions had been observed, Draco added, "I'm starving and thought you might want to help me out with a snack."

This got Ben to grin up at him and Draco flashed him the first genuine smile he had given all night. They reached the study and found the snack, which actually looked more like a small meal, already spread out across a table. They both ate, though Draco far more slowly than Ben.

"Are you ready for Hogwarts?" Draco asked absently.

Ben shrugged before swallowing, "I guess as ready as I'll ever be."

"Oh, what's the worry now?"

Slowly, Ben pushed his plate away before replying, "Well, I've heard you talk about house rivalry all the time and I guess I was just wondering what will happen when I get sorted."

Draco could tell the boy was really dancing around his real concern and it didn't take but a moment for him to figure out what Ben was actually on about, "Ben, you know I wouldn't be upset if you were sorted into different house, right? And if it's Harper you're worried about, there's no reason you can't still be friends if you end up in separate houses. Is that what was bothering you?"

Ben gave him a weak smile and nodded, "I know it was silly, but I couldn't help thinking about it. There is one more thing I wanted to know though..."

"What's that?"

"Is Professor Snape really as horrible as everyone says?"

Draco laughed, "In some ways he is. He demands perfection in the potions classroom and he might seem cold but I think he cares more about the students than most think."

"Does he really give a test in the first week?" Ben asked worriedly.

"Sometimes, but for you it will be simple stuff, like common potion bases and ingredients. Draco looked at the time and saw that the party would last for a while yet, "Let's go the lab and I'll quiz you. You'll see, you probably know most of it already."

As they stood up the food remains disappeared and they quickly made their way to the potions lab below the ground floor. The room was completely clean and organized, save for one lone glass bottle sitting on the worktable. The bottle was labeled something Draco had never heard of before but sat empty and with a crack running up the side. Potions containers were spelled not to shatter but cracks could definitely happen and this bottle was now useless. Draco sat the bottle aside to be disposed of later.

Draco told Ben to turn around and he then proceeded to get out several basic ingredients and bases he knew were covered in First year. Carefully he removed lids and stoppers and lined the containers up on display, making sure all the labels were hidden. Some of the dry ingredients he actually laid out on the worktable so they could more easily be seen. Finally, he had Ben turned around and proceeded to have him name the item, list its properties, and give some examples of what potions it could be found in. As each item was completed, Draco would remove the item and put it back into its proper spot. Ben quickly grew more confident in his abilities and it was obvious he hardly had to think to make it through most of the items.

It was as Draco was picking up a correctly identified transfiguration base to replace the cap that Ben suddenly asked, "Draco, how long have you and Ian been having sex." The container began to slip from Draco's fingers as he registered the question but he managed to save it, but not without spilling some on the table and on the last dry ingredient as well as hitting another bottle with his elbow, causing it to slosh out before Ben steadied it.

"What!?"

"I said..."

"I heard you, but why are you even asking?" Draco sputtered out.

"Well you two just seemed a lot closer this summer and well, I wanted to spend some time with you before you left a few days ago and when I went to Ian's room looking for you I heard... noises." Ben trailed off uncertainly.

"Oh Merlin," Draco sighed as he ran a hand through his hair. His little brother had heard him and Ian having sex.

They were quiet for a moment before the awkward silence obviously got to Ben, "I'm sorry, I was just curious. I would have asked Ian but I thought you were more likely to answer. Does this mean you're even more like my brother now since you're dating my brother?"

The horror of realizing how much Ben now knew about his sex life began to pass and Draco looked up at him, "In a way it does, but Ben I want you to know that we aren't having... we aren't together just because we're really good friends. I love Ian and that is the only time you should be with someone like that and..."

"Draco, its ok, I've had the sex-talk before," Ben stopped him, his cheeks a light shade of pink.

Glad that he didn't have to go there, Draco nodded before he got to the big issue, "Ben, you can't tell anyone. No one knows yet and we want to keep it that way for now. Hopefully until I get out of school. That way our parents can't say I'm too young and we won't have to worry about my father. OK?"

Ben nodded before suddenly grinning and launching himself at Draco, giving him a tight hug, "I'm glad you're in love, Draco. I'm glad you're happy."

Draco returned the embrace for a long time before they were suddenly interrupted.

"Do I get a hug too?"

Draco looked up to see Ian coming down the stairs.

"So go give him a hug," Ben whispered to him before pulling away.

Draco grinned and decided that even if he wished Ben had not heard what he had, he was nice that there was at least someone they didn't have to act around anymore. Draco briskly walked up to his lover and put his arms around him before pressing his face into the side Ian's neck and giving him a light kiss there. He felt Ian tense up at the intimate gesture since his brother was in the room, but Draco just held on tighter and whispered, "He knows."

"He knows?" Ian asked, startled as he pulled back, "How?"

Draco just shook his head, "You don't want to know."

Ben closed up the rest of the potions ingredients and put them away, leaving only the spills and the now soggy dry ingredients to be cleaned up. "Thanks for the help Draco, but you know how much I was enjoying that party. I better get back," Ben said with a grin, "I'll just get out of your way."

Draco grinned and watched him disappear up the stairs. He and Ian both heard the door at the top shut and the next thing Draco knew there was a pair of hot lips on his and an eager tongue pushing into his mouth. A shiver ran up his spine and he felt his arousal rise in his trousers and Ian's hands moved across his body.

"I missed you so much. I've been wanted to kiss you all day," Ian said before his mouth settled on the skin just beneath his ear. Draco just held on to his lover more tightly in

response, only loosening his grip to allow Ian to push his outer robe off his shoulders and onto the floor.

In all the time they had been lovers Draco had never felt such urgent lust and when Ian lifted him up onto the worktable so that they were more the same height, Draco couldn't resist using his legs to pull Ian more tightly to him. Before he knew what was happening, he was laying back on the table with Ian leaning over him, completely unaware that the back of his shirt was now soaked, and trying to figure out why there were so many clothes between them. Ian's shirt was coming off one way or another even if he had to...

"Eric, I am so glad we didn't show up five minutes from now. That would have been downright embarrassing."

"I know what you mean Kayd, seeing two of my best friends go at it like bunnies is definitely on my 'things to avoid' list."

Draco and Ian pulled apart so fast it was all Draco could do to keep from falling off the table. "Shit!" Ian said as it dawned on the two of them how close they had come to having sex where anyone could walk in on them.

Meanwhile, Kayd and Eric were laughing hysterically, "The look on your faces," Kayd managed to sputter out.

It was Eric who managed to sober up first, "Seriously guys, we knew. We grew up together, did you honestly think we wouldn't notice that you two were acting differently? I mean, I bet even Ben suspects something."

"He knows," Ian said, starting to calm down.

"Oh Merlin!" Kayd said in a mix between horror and amusement, "Did he walk in on you too?"

Draco felt his face warm up, "He um, overheard us."

Ian paled at the news.

Eric cleared his throat, "Well as much fun as we're having the reason we came to find you is that Draco, your father's getting a little antsy wondering where you are. He even asked your mom if she knew where you were off too, but she just shrugged him off in front of some officials, saying something about leaving the young people alone."

"It was priceless, Draco. I love your mother!" Kayd giggled.

"But you should probably head back up before Lucius sends a house elf or something," Eric added.

Draco nodded and finally slid off the table. He could feel himself shaking a little from the shock of being so abruptly pulled out of his lusty haze.

"Your shirt," Ian said and Draco realized his shirt was wet from lying on the table.

"Ben and I had a spill but it was nothing dangerous. I'll go change my shirt," Draco explained, not really registering that the wetness on his shirt was far more than what they had spilled.

Ian picked up his robe and helped him put it on to cover his wet shirt before the four of them left the potions lab. The party lasted only a little longer and ended uneventfully. Kayd and Eric headed home with their respective families and the Pierces and the Malfoys all soon made their way toward their beds.

Later that night in his dimly lit bedroom, Draco finally got to say the words he had waited all night for.

"I love you too," Ian replied after a moment. Draco could clearly see the emotion on his face and Ian pulled him closer and kissed him.

"I don't know what I'm going to do when we're apart," Draco said, holding tight to Ian as they lay in bed, only their boxers separating their bodies.

"Don't think about it," Ian squeezed him tighter.

Slowly, Draco pulled away just enough to reach under his pillow to get what he needed. He leaned forward to brush a slow, gentle kiss across Ian's lips before taking his lover's hand and placing the lubricant in his palm. "I want you to make love to me," Draco said, looking right at Ian, even though he wanted to blush and look away.

Ian looked down at the lubricant and then back at his lover. The meaning of the gesture registered on Ian's face. He didn't stop to question it, he just returned Draco's light kiss to show his acceptance and love before letting the kiss build.

Before the night was out, there were sounds of need, sounds of pain, and many, many sounds of pleasure. In the morning there was love, tenderness, and not even a hint of regret.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Departing From Love

Time was up. Summer was over and no matter how many times Draco tried to tell himself that it was his last year at Hogwarts, he couldn't help fretting over what might be ahead of him. He knew he had to calm himself down. Since the day after the party he had been worrying himself sick. Draco did his best to keep from fidgeting as his stomach gave another twinge.

To distract himself, Draco looked at his mother sitting next to him in the hired car that was taking them to King's Cross, but that only brought up more unsettling thoughts. Last night when he had finished packing his trunk for school, he had gone to his mother's room. Draco knew there had been a time when his parents had shared a room but that had changed shortly before he had started school. When he got to her room, Draco found her packing as well and he knew that after his mother and the Pierces saw himself and Ben off, his mother would be going home with them.

"All packed?" his mother had asked him with a smile.

Draco just nodded, his eyes on his mother's luggage. He loved his mother but why couldn't she just choose? Either stay here and play happy families with Lucius or get a divorce from the man it was obvious neither of them cared for. Pick one!

"What's the matter?" Narcissia asked, noticing the look on her son's face.

Draco didn't think he had ever spoken to his mother in anger before but there was a first for everything. Emotion that he didn't know he had came out when he spoke, "Why don't you just leave him? Leave him for good!" The suddenly weary look on Narcissia's face was enough to keep him from going on but it didn't stop the tears that were starting to form in his eyes. It had been years since he had cried in front of his mother.

"Oh Draco," she started, but stopped as if she didn't know where to start. After a long moment she spoke again, "Your father wasn't always the way he is now. I wouldn't have married him if I hadn't loved him and I loved him very much."

She paused as she took a seat on her bed and motioned for Draco to sit next to her. "He was sweet when I first met him," she finally continued, "a perfect gentlemen, and very ambitious. And believe me, when all the other boys can talk about is the upcoming Quidditch season and how many chocolate frogs they were dared to eat at one time, a man who has a focus in his life is very attractive. I fell in love with him. He said he loved me. We got married and had you."

"I didn't think he could ever love anyone," Draco interjected bitterly.

Narcissia put her arms around her son, "You should have seen the look in his eyes after I had you. He thought you were the most perfect creature in the entire world. He told me how much he loved me for giving him such a beautiful son and we would sit together sometimes and watch you sleep. I think the only reason he got his own office at the Ministry so early in his career was because everyone was tired of being interrupted just so he could show them your picture."

"All we are to him now are tools to get him back up where he wants to be. Because of him Hogwarts is hell!" Draco sniffed, "He doesn't love us. I can't believe he ever did!" Draco turned his face away. He didn't want to hear this. Somehow it hurt more to know that his father had once had a real interest in him in a time back before he could remember. It was easier to think of Lucius as incapable of love.

Draco felt his mother's arms tighten around him and felt her press her cheek to his. She was crying. "I'm so sorry baby," She mumbled into his hair, "I wish you could have known him the way I did."

"Why?" Draco asked as his anger returned, "Why are we here?"

Narcissia sat back and looked at her son, "I... I guess I still hoped that the man I fell in love with wasn't gone for good, that his ambition hadn't completely taken him away from me. I didn't want to know how bad he had gotten Draco, so I pulled us away from him, but I

could never completely let go.” She paused as she blotted her face, “I guess I’ll have to let go.”

They hadn’t said anything else about their family situation since last night but it gave Draco plenty to think about. He suddenly knew an entirely new side of Narcissia Malfoy. She wasn’t just his mother but a woman who had had love and lost it. Draco couldn’t picture Ian ever changing so much as Lucius apparently had, but the mere thought of losing his lover in any way made him feel weak. His mother wasn’t perfect, but her love had kept her from giving up on her husband and Draco could understand that. As for Lucius himself... well, Draco had just been glad that his father hadn’t been around this morning. If he had seen the man, Draco wasn’t sure he could have kept it together.

Looking out the window to gauge their progress, Draco was surprised to see that they were passing St. Pancras. A moment later, the car slowed and found a place to stop in front of King’s Cross. He had been so caught up in his thoughts that he had missed most of the journey.

Narcissia paid the driver and soon they were pulling their luggage out of the car and making their way into the busy train station. Swarms of people weaved in and out and Draco and his mother joined them as they headed toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten. They passed the same pastry stand Draco remembered passing every year. Usually, the smells coming from the stand made him eager for the snack lady once they got onto the train. Today it just made his stomach give another funny switch.

With little delay, they made it to the barrier. One moment, Draco was heading directly into a brick wall and the next he was standing on platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. He and his mother were just looking around when they heard, “Draco! Aunt Narcissia!” A second later Draco found himself nearly bowled over as Ben first gave him a hug before turning to Narcissia to do the same.

Looking up, Draco caught sight of Ian watching them with an amused grin. It made him want to go over there and kiss it off him. Unfortunately, they were with his mother, Ben, and Kate and Holden Pierce on a crowded platform. Holden and Kate greeted him and his mother with warm hugs as well. Ian gave him a brief embrace, but even that was enough to send a shiver up Draco’s spine.

“Are you all set for Hogwarts Ben?” Narcissia asked with a smile.

Ben nodded, “I’m a bit nervous, but I think I’ll feel better when Harper gets here.”

“You know son,” Holden spoke up with a teasing look, “It not too late to change your mind.”

Ben’s eyes got wide for a moment, “No, no Dad! I’m sure I’ll get along great at Hogwarts.”

Holden just chuckled and pulled Ben to him for a brief hug, “That’s all I wanted to hear, son.”

Draco smiled at the exchange and he had to wonder how different things would be if Lucius had been more like Holden. He pushed those thoughts away in time to see Ian giving him a strange look. He shot his lover a smile.

"Ian, come help Draco and I with our trunks before Harper gets here!" Ben said before making a dash toward where their baggage sat.

"We'll be back," Ian told their parents before he and Draco went to follow Ben as the small boy struggled with his trunk.

Between the three of them it took only a minute to get the luggage up onto the train. They picked an empty car near the rear of the train and soon had their things stowed away. No sooner did they have things in place then Ben was suddenly off again, "I'm going to explore, I'll meet you back here in a minute." Before either Ian or Draco could react the hyper eleven year old was out the door, but not before Ben gave them both a very obvious wink.

"I think we've been set up," Draco said a moment later as he looked up at Ian.

"I guess it's the least he could do. He's been teasing me since the party. Kept asking if the reason I looked so sad was because I was missing my 'Pookie'," Ian laughed.

"'Pookie', huh? Well I hope he realizes that we're going to be spending the next several hours on a train together. I'll have plenty of opportunity to get him back for that," the Slytherin said with a fake scowl.

Ian moved closer and put his hands on Draco's hips. "Or maybe you should thank him for giving us time for this," he said as he leaned down to kiss the shorter boy's lips.

With a small sound of agreement, Draco returned the kiss, opening his mouth as Ian's tongue brushed his lower lip. It took only a second before they had their arms around each other and in each other's hair. Finally, their lips separated, but they didn't pull away.

"Definitely a thank you," Draco whispered against his lover's neck.

Ian pulled back a little bit more to look down at the blond boy, brushing his cheek lightly with his thumb. "We didn't get to talk the other morning," he said.

"No."

Ian suddenly looked worried, "You were ok right? I didn't hurt you did I?"

Draco couldn't help but smile even as his face heated up to remember how intimate they had been together, "No, I was fine. A little sore, but it was worth it."

A blush graced Ian's cheeks as well and they both giggled as they stood their together, what they had done written all over their faces.

"I love you," Ian said, "I brought you something."

Draco's grinned, "I love you too....what is it?"

"You brat!" Ian teased, before reaching down to grab a small bag he had sat down earlier. He opened it up and pulled out a gray, round thing with a strange cord coming out of it and handed it to Draco.

"What is it?" the Slytherin asked as he carefully took it. Up close he could see buttons similar to the ones on Ian's stereo.

"It's a portable CD player. The batteries have been altered so it should work at Hogwarts. I figured that when the band is working on something we could record it and owl you a CD so you can be part of it too. I also got you a couple of other CDs to listen too to keep you company," Ian explained as he fished the other items from his bag.

Draco leaned in and kissed Ian firmly on the lips, "Thank you, I was really going to miss listening in on what you guys were doing."

"It's not going to be the same without you."

"One more year," Draco replied even as his stomach gave another twitch.

Ian saw him tense, "Are you ok?"

"I'm just nervous. I have my stomach in knots," Draco replied after his insides gave him something closer to a pinch.

"Relax," Ian said, pulling him closer, "You'll be fine. I'm going to write all the time. Maybe if I can arrange it I can make it to Hogsmeade some weekends."

The couple just held each other until they heard someone at the door to the car. They jumped apart as it was pushed open. Luckily, it was only Ben, "I saw Harper and her family come through the barrier a second ago. We better go down to meet them."

"Yeah," Ian said as he and Draco made their way off the train, "Thanks little brother."

Far too quickly Draco found himself again on the train, this time not to get off until they got to Hogwarts. He sat in the car with Ben and Harper as they pulled out of the station. He watched the platform until they got too far away. Even after Ben and Harper left to go talk with some other first years, Draco kept picturing Ian on that platform, mouthing 'I love you,' for only him to see.

CHAPTER NINE: Name Calling and Lion Cubs

'How could a room filled with so much chaos still be so beautiful and enchanting?' Draco asked himself as he made his way into the Great Hall. The excited voices of all the students pouring into the room was nearly deafening, yet the majesty of the long wood tables, floating candles, and the ceiling spelled to look like the night sky still seemed to cast a glow of warmth and comfort. Maybe that last part was a spell too.

Draco made sure he picked a seat where he would have a good view of the sorting and then sat quietly as the other students filled in around him. The ride on the Hogwarts Express had been relatively quiet and uneventful. A few people dropped by to ask him how his summer went, but as usual he didn't have any in depth conversations with anyone. This

year, the lack of real interaction was due to choice; before it had been because of the presence of Crabb and Goyle, but they were both gone now.

The two absent boys had not been bright, but they had been angry a lot of the time and Draco had fed off of those emotions. That combined with the feeling of power that came with having two guys nearly twice his size at his back as he pushed other people around had been enough to give him a sense of control his first couple years at Hogwarts. Unfortunately, the families of the two boys had not been as conniving as Lucius in shrugging off blame and now Crabb and Goyle were finishing their education as part of a special tutoring program created for the children of convicted Death Eaters. Effectively, those children were now orphans and declared wards of the Ministry.

While Draco had already begun to wind down from his youthful scathing attitude by the time the Boy Who Lived finally got rid of Voldmorte, the absence of his former companions brought his harsh comments to a screeching halt. It was only now, as he sat alone, that Draco could appreciate what a different person he was without the opportunity or need to act so aggressively. Part of it was definitely the lack of angry companions to cheer him on, the rest was given to maturity and of course his recent actions in taking control of his life. Draco pictured Ian again and forced himself not to smile.

Draco looked up as Blaise Zabini sat down next to him. He didn't know the other boy very well but the two of them had gotten closer in the past year. Though Blaise still wasn't someone he would ever consider confiding in, he certainly was not unwelcome.

"Have you seen the way some of the girls are looking at you?" Zabini said by way of greeting. "You wanna tell me which one you pissed off so I know to watch my step?"

Draco looked around and found with some surprise that Blaise was correct: several girls were occasionally shooting him death stares. He had picked up on it before but had put it off as being the usual treatment reserved for a Malfoy such as himself, but now that it was mentioned, there was something more than the usual dislike in the looks people were giving him. For one, most of them were girls and a good few of them were even from his house!

"I have no clue Blaise," Draco finally answered. "I haven't seen most them since the end of last term and those I did see I barely exchanged more than pleasantries with."

"Well you had better figure it out before they all gang up and hex you back to first year."

Draco nodded but continued to look around, hoping for some clue as to why he was suddenly complete scum to the entire female population of Hogwarts. He let his eyes make a full circle of the room until he finally got back to his own table. It wasn't until then that he caught sight of Pansy Parkinson sitting some ways down from him. At first, this struck him as unusual because she was as close to a good friend as he had at Hogwarts. Even if they weren't sitting right next to each other, they almost always sat within chatting distance.

Looking at her, Draco grew concerned as he realized she was just sitting there staring down at her hands in her lap.

Turning back to Zabini he nudged him and then tilted his head in the girl's direction, "What's with Pansy?"

Blaise studied her for a moment, a calculating look in his eye, "I don't know, but I'll bet you she's somehow the source of this emergency meeting of the 'I hate Malfoy' club."

Draco didn't reply as he was too busy trying not grab his midsection as his stomach gave another violent twist. The twinges and aches had gotten steadily worse on the train, like his insides were rearranging themselves. He looked at Pansy again, this time to find her watching him. When she saw him look however, her gaze quickly returned to her lap. Great. Another thing to worry himself sick over.

To distract himself, Draco looked up to the staff table, waiting for a sign that the sorting would begin soon as most of the students were now settled in their seats. The staff table was full and a quick glance showed him his professors for the upcoming year. The usual mix of teachers were present, but new in the crowd was Remus Lupin who had returned to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts and Sirius Black who had apparently come to assist Lupin and to help with the new required period that had been the subject of many rumors since the end of last term. Draco didn't know much about Black, despite the man being his cousin, though he did know he was Harry Potter's godfather and according to what his mother remembered he had quite a temper. The thought of what they could mean for him almost made Draco get up and start heading for the door.

The sound of the Great Hall doors opening stopped his train of thought and Draco watched as the new first years made their way single file into the room. The Sorting Hat soon started its song and the Slytherin almost smiled at the humorous descriptions of the houses. The Hat's song had become more light-hearted in the past two years. When the song ended the sorting began without further introduction. Draco managed to find Ben in the line and he gave the fidgeting boy a smile once he managed to catch his eye.

Finally, McGonagall read in her prim voice, "Pierce, Benjamin!"

Draco watched in anticipation as his little brother wiggled his way up onto the stool and had the Hat placed on his head. The seconds seemed like hours and Draco held his breath...

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Hesitating only a moment, Draco began to clap for Ben. Blaise and some of the others shot him strange looks. Draco shrugged, "He's like a brother to me." He probably would have clapped if Ben had ended up in Hufflepuff.

Draco watched the rest of the sorting with little interest, only clapping again when Ben's best friend and personal shadow, Harper Skelly, was also sorted into Gryffindor. The sorting ended and Dumbledore went through the usual announcements. Everyone was

waiting to hear more about the new class period but all that the Headmaster would divulge was that they would all find out what was going on at their first class meeting. After Dumbledore gave the word the food appeared on the table and as usual the students tucked in at an alarming rate.

Using his fork, Draco scooted the few items he had chosen around on his plate. Eating didn't sound like a good idea when his insides still felt like they were turning themselves inside out, but he knew he needed to eat something. He tried to pick some things that he thought wouldn't sit too heavily in his stomach, but food seem unappealing all together, which made it even harder to choke down.

In the end, Draco found he was spending more time observing everyone else in the Great Hall, particularly the Gryffindore table to see how Ben was getting on. Draco was really very glad Ben hadn't ended up in Slytherin. At least this way he wouldn't have to deal with all the reputation that came along with the house of serpents.

After student began to get their fill of the food, the angry looks in started up again. He even caught sight of the Golden Trio giving him more hateful looks than usual. Whatever was going around about him, Draco was sure he'd hear about it soon.

"Take that back!"

The voice was unmistakably Ben's and Draco looked up in surprise and horror to see little Ben Pierce standing up at his seat and staring hard at the Golden Trio and more specifically, Weasley.

"He's a slime ball and doesn't deserve your defense!" Weasley's voice rang clearly as the hall began to quiet in order to hear the altercation. Draco was already out of his seat and rushing around to the Gryffindor table, automatically knowing the argument was about him. He caught sight of McGonagall and Black making their way down from the staff table, but Draco new he would arrive first.

"He's my BROTHER! He's not any of those terrible things! Take it back!"

Weasley's face was turning red even as Granger tried to calm him down, "No, you little..."

"Weasley!" Draco said as he finally got to Ben. He made sure to get in between the redhead and his brother. "Here I thought you were a Prefect and you're having a yelling match with a first year. I'll ask that you sit down and leave Ben alone!"

"Draco," Ben started, grabbing his arm, "The things they were saying, I couldn't, I..."

Draco looked down at his little brother as Ben trailed off. He could see the boy was close to tears even though he was doing his best to hide it. It was his first days of school someone he looked up to had been verbally thrown from grace right in front of him. On impulse Draco wrapped his arm around him, though he knew the entire Great Hall was looking on.

"What's going on here?"

Draco looked up to see that Sirius Black and Professor McGonagall had finally reached them. Black was giving him a hard, challenging look but Draco didn't step back as the larger man invaded his personal space. He forced himself to look calm, "Professor Black, my apologies. Ben is like a brother to me. When I saw him in an argument with Weasley I couldn't stop myself from stepping in."

Black kept his gaze on him as he asked, "Harry, what was this argument about?"

Draco didn't look away from Black either even as he felt Ben's grip tighten on his arm. "Umm, Ben heard us say some unpleasant thing about Malfoy. He got upset and demanded we take it back," Potter finally replied after a nervous hesitation.

"Name calling is hardly the example I would hope that the seventh years would be setting for the rest of the school and a screaming match at the welcoming feast is completely unacceptable!" McGonagall spoke finally. "Twenty points from Gryffindor for such juvenile behavior!"

"And ten point from Slytherin for getting involved where you are not needed," Black added after a moment. "Get back to your own table and everyone get back to your meal."

The Professors moved to head back the staff table. "Professor McGonagall," Draco spoke up, appealing to the one he thought would be more accommodating, "Could I sit and talk with Ben for just a moment?"

Black looked furious when he turned around but before he could speak McGonagall answered, "As you appear to be very close to Mr. Pierce I will allow for you to speak with him here as long as you wish. However, if there are any more outbursts this evening I will hold you personally accountable. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes Professor, completely. Thank you," Draco said as sincerely as he could, knowing he was treading dangerously, especially with Black still giving him a cold look.

Draco got even more angry looks as he squeezed into a seat next to Ben and Harper who sat on the other side of him, but no one said anything and the Slytherin chose to ignore them. The two first years were looking up at him with wide eyes. While he was more worried about Ben, he realized that Harper looked up to him as well and the poor girl was probably just as upset as her friend.

"Ben, Harper, I am sorry you had to hear them say those things about me," Draco started.

"They aren't true," Ben broke in, "I spent all summer with you. I know they aren't true!"

Draco hushed Ben even as he realized that the boy probably knew why everyone was being even more hateful than usual toward him. He was tempted to ask what they had said, but knew that talking about it would only make Ben more upset. "I know, but something you have to understand is that I haven't always been very nice to a lot of the people here at

Hogwarts. I'm not that way anymore, but I haven't done anything to change people's minds."

"They called you horrible names!" It was Harper who interrupted this time, "They said you were nasty person, but you've always been nice to us!"

Draco sighed, wondering how he could get them to understand without sharing what he had done and said in the past. He was rather ashamed of some of those things and didn't have the heart to completely crush Ben and Harper's view of him. He tried again, "They don't know me the way you two do. Like I said, I haven't always been very nice to them. If they say bad things about me it's because they think I deserve it and maybe in some ways I do."

This only seemed to make Ben even more upset, "But how can you just sit there while they say those things and think about you that way?"

Shaking his head Draco tried to find the word, "Because I don't care what they think or say about me Ben. I go to school with these people, but most of them I probably won't ever see again after graduation. It's what the people I love think about me that matters, people like our parents, Ian, and the two of you. As long as you all believe in me and love me that's all that matters. You are what is important to me, OK?"

The two first years slowly shook their heads, but Draco could tell it was still a bit much for them. Their new schoolmates were saying horrible things about one of the people they looked up to the most and he was trying to tell them it was OK. On impulse, he reached out and pulled Ben into a tight hug and with one arm he reached to pull Harper close as well. They both returned the hug tightly, which Draco thought was a good sign. He became aware that several people were staring at the display, but suddenly Draco realized how much truth was in his words. He really didn't care what people thought. While at any other time he might have been embarrassed by his current actions, he found that because it was for two very important people in his life, it just didn't matter.

"Are we all better?" Draco asked when they finally all pulled apart.

Harper nodded, but Ben looked at him sharply, "We will be as soon as you eat." The boy proceeded to move his place setting over and suddenly another setting appeared in front of Draco.

"What?" the Slytherin asked dumbly.

"Ian told me he was counting on me to keep an eye on you. He said you didn't feel well and to make sure that you ate," Ben explained, slightly embarrassed but more determined than anything. "Eat!"

Draco blushed at having been found out but inside he felt warm knowing Ian was still looking out for him and pride in Ben's fortitude in seeing his brother's wishes through. Silently, he picked up the bowl of potatoes in front of him and put some on his plate before he began eating. He raised an eyebrow at Ben who was still watching.

"It's a start," the boy said. The Slytherin and the two first-year Gryffindors finished their meal together, exchanging very little conversation and paying no attention whatsoever to the whispers and stares around them as their fellow students speculated on the odd events.

CHAPTER TEN: Misconceptions

The following morning Draco made his way to the Great Hall for breakfast at a leisurely pace. He was in no rush to once again face his classmates but at least he felt better. It had been all he could do to get to sleep the night before, but surprisingly when he woke up the sharp pains in his abdominal had been replaced with a dull ache and even that had diminished by the end of his morning shower. He still felt off, though he couldn't describe how, but at least he felt a little more in control and like he could hold his breakfast down.

With only a moment of hesitation, Draco pushed open the door to the Great Hall and walked in. Several heads turned to give him a cold look. Draco was not surprised and pretending as if he hadn't noticed, turned quickly to head to the Slytherin table.

"Draco! Over here!"

Looking up, Draco caught sight of Ben waving to him from the Gryffindor table. With an amused smile on his face he headed to where his little brother sat, again a little too close to the Golden Trio for his liking.

"How was your first night," Draco asked Ben as he reached him, but didn't sit down in the space the boy had left for him.

Ben shrugged and smiled, "It was ok. It kinda felt like I was at a big overnight party. Sit down and have breakfast with us."

"Sorry Ben, I think a snake taking two meals in the lion's den in less than twenty-four hours is asking a bit much for some people to tolerate," Draco replied. Out of the corner of his eye he could just see Weasley nodding and heard him grumble, "Damn right."

"Have dinner with us again then?" Harper asked.

"We'll see, but how about after class we meet in the courtyard and you two can tell me about your first day?"

The two first years nodded in agreement and Draco was just about to go find his own seat when he heard the flapping of wings that announced that arrival of the morning post. Rather than risk getting hit in the head by falling parcels he stayed where he was next to the Gryffindor table. He was a little surprised when he felt a wing graze his ear as one owl settled on his shoulder, but he had to fight to keep from grinning like a fool when he recognized it as Ian's owl, Archimedes.

"Ohhhh, Draco has a loooooove letter!" Ben said rather loudly, causing both him and Harper to erupt in laughter.

Draco could feel his face heat up and could just imagine how red his face must look to all the people who had turned around to stare, yet the Slytherin couldn't bring himself to be upset as he took the letter from Archimedes. "Hush you," Draco said to the two giggling first years.

"Well let's hear it, what does Pookie have to say?" Ben went on with an impish grin on his face.

"Nothing that you were meant to hear, now watch out or I'll tell your brother you called him that," Draco teased. It was only a moment later that he realized he had just outed himself and his relationship to Harper. Draco could see it on her face the moment she realized the meaning behind what he had said. "Shh," He said. "It's a secret." Still looking stunned, Harper nodded.

"Don't worry," Ben told Draco, giving him a serious look and the Slytherin knew that Ben would make sure his friend didn't spill the beans to their parents.

Draco nodded and then smiled, "Well then, I'm going back to my table to have my breakfast and read my letter."

Not really paying attention, Draco began to walk away with what he knew was a silly grin on his face as he held his letter. He had only taken two or three steps when he was suddenly pulled out of his happy state by a sharp shove in the side that sent him staggering into the back of a Ravenclaw. It took him a moment to stand himself back up to face his attacker. He turned around half expecting to find Weasley seething over something or other, but was absolutely shocked to find that it was Hermione Granger standing behind him with fire in her eyes and Potter holding her in place by her arm.

"Great example to set for your first year 'brother' Malfoy!" Granger spat. "You just go on and enjoy your little flings and walk away. You don't care about anybody but yourself do you, you bloody bastard!"

Both Potter and Weasley were urging her to calm down, but at the same time they were also shooting Draco looks of loathing. Draco gapped at the furious Gryffindors. "What are you talking about?" He finally sputtered out in frustration.

"Malfoy," a voice spoke from behind him. It was Black, "Take your seat and I don't want to see you anywhere but your own table from now on."

Still reeling from the outburst that seemed so out of character for Granger, Draco just nodded. He found that he was feeling ill all over again as he sat down next to Blaise who was watching him closely, though Draco barely noticed him. Not feeling like eating, he reached for Ian's letter, which had only gotten slightly creased during the excitement. Hoping that whatever his lover had to say would lighten his mood, he unrolled the parchment and looked down at the sharp lines of Ian's handwriting.

Draco smiled through the odd feeling in his gut as he read about how Ian missed him already and promising to come out on the first Hogsmead weekend. At the bottom of the

parchment a small circle the shape of a button was attached to the paper. Draco had to look twice to realize it was a CD that had been shrunk. Below it, it said, "Just me messing around on my guitar." To his embarrassment, the backs of his eyes pricked and he had to reign in his emotions.

Over the summer they had often just sat around and talked while Ian and sometimes Draco would play softly and unthinkingly on the guitar. Every once in a while they would come up with something interesting that they would work with until it became an entire piece. In Draco's opinion, some of their best stuff came about that way. He vowed he would listen to the CD at the first opportunity, even if he had to shut himself behind his bed curtains so no body could see him cry like a baby. Why did he have to be here again?

Draco carefully refolded the letter and sat it next to him on the table. He could see Black sitting and talking with the Golden Trio. Every once in a while one of them would look over at him and a couple times he saw them gesturing up at Dumbledore. Great. He could hardly wait to see what they had in store for him.

"How am I ever going to survive a year of this?" Draco asked aloud and was surprised when someone actually answered.

"I don't know mate," Blaise spoke up from beside him, "but you might want to eat your breakfast. I have a feeling your going to need all your strength for this one."

Draco paused for a moment, "Why do I get the feeling you know what's going on?"

"And you still don't?"

"No! And I get the feeling I'm the only one!"

Blaise looked at him intently, as if assessing how truthful he was being, "Well, I'll tell you, but first I have to ask you one question, ok?"

"Fine!" Draco said in frustration, as he made himself reach for his pumpkin juice and take a sip despite the rolling of his stomach.

"When did you and Pansy hook up?"

Draco was just swallowing as he fully registered what Blaise had said. The juice promptly forced its way back up and it was all Draco could do to keep it from spraying it all over the table. As it was, he was coughing to clear the wayward juice out of his airway.

"What?!" he finally managed to rasp out.

"I take it then that you and Pansy never had sex?"

"No!"

Blaise looked him straight in the eye, "You really, REALLY need to talk to Pansy."

Draco nodded, "Where is she?"

"She's in the bathroom, puking," Blaise answered idly moved his own food around on his plate, "its called morning sickness."

Draco's knuckles turned white as he gripped the edge of the table. He felt faint and like he might go do some puking of his own. A hand gripped his shoulder. He looked up at Blaise's concerned face.

"Malfoy," he said in alarm, "you aren't going to pass out on me are you?"

Draco shook his friend off, but wasn't really paying attention. It all made sense now. Everyone thought that he had knocked Pansy up and then left her to deal with it by herself. That was why Ben had gotten so angry the night before when he had overheard the Gryffindors talking about it. Ben knew where he had been all summer. That also explained why he was pure evil to the entire female population and why Granger had attacked him after Ben announced to the entire Hall that he had gotten a love letter. Not only did he apparently fuck Pansy and leave her to clean up the mess, but he had moved on to someone else. Perfect.

Draco stood shakily. "I have to get out of here," he told his friend.

Blaise nodded, "I'll see if I can find out anything else."

With unsteady steps, he walked toward the door but before he could reach it Black was once again right next to him, "I'm going to talk to Dumbledore and you can expect that you and Miss Parkinson will be asked to meet in his office after classes. Is that clear?"

Draco merely nodded before pushing his way out of the room, his mind too preoccupied to be annoyed at Black's behavior towards him. Right now, he needed to find Pansy and ask her what the hell was going on. Was she really pregnant? Was she really telling people it was his? Just thinking about it made him ill.

Blaise had said that Pansy was in the bathroom. Hoping he had been correct, Draco made his way to the girls bathroom just off the main corridor. At first he thought he would wait for a girl to walk by and ask her to check for him, but after only a moment of waiting anger began to replace his initial shock. He pushed the bathroom door open a crack, "Pansy, if you're in there I think it's about time you came out and explained yourself."

Draco was surprised at the amount of anger in his own voice as he practically spat out the words. He was about to try again a bit more softly when suddenly the door was jerked from his hand and thrown open. In front of him stood Granger looking madder than she had that day third year when she had slapped him.

"It seems to me Malfoy, that you are the one with some explaining to do, you disgusting pig!"

Draco felt himself taking a step back as she got closer and closer, "I'm just trying to figure out what's going on Granger, this doesn't concern you!"

Granger looked even more pissed than before, "Well I am making it my concern! I might not have gotten along with Pansy but she is my fellow classmate and a fellow woman. I can't understand what she was doing with someone like you in the first place Malfoy, but believe me, I am making it my business to make sure you get your just deserts this time. Let's

just wait and see what Daddy says when he finds out. I may be a 'mudblood' as you call me but I do know that a man abandoning his child, even one created out of wedlock is highly frowned upon in the Wizarding World. I'll be there in Dumbledore's office this afternoon. I can't wait to see you try and talk yourself out of this one."

With that Granger turned on her heel and marched back into the bathroom, not giving him a second look. Draco was left pale and shaking after the verbal assault. It was obvious Granger had made Pansy into one of her pet project, just like that S.P.E.W. campaign of hers in second year. No doubt this one was mostly driven by her hate for him. If Draco knew one thing about Hermione Granger it was that she was determined and Draco was feeling suffocated as he tried to think of how he could convince Dumbledore and everyone else this afternoon that he had nothing to do with Pansy's pregnancy if she was indeed pregnant.

Draco suddenly felt exhausted and cold. He didn't want to be here. Not bothering to look at his watch, which was pointing to "Potions - running late!" he made his way back to the Slytherin dormitory where he went to his bed, only pausing to get the CD player Ian had given him from his trunk. He crawled under the covers, pulling the curtains shut after him, and enlarged the CD he had received that morning. Draco found that if he lay on his back his stomach didn't churn as much, so that's how he stayed. Within minutes he was drifting off to sleep to the sound of Ian's strumming and he could almost imagine that it was still summer and that he had never come back to this hell called Hogwarts.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Meetings and Unexpected Visitors

It was hours later when Draco was pulled from the depths of his sleep by a nudge on his shoulder. Lying there, with his eyes still closed, he thought for a moment that it was Ian coming to wake him up. He was just about to make some comment about staying in bed a little longer when he finally managed to crack his eyes open and saw the dark green hangings of his bed at Hogwarts. The next thing he saw was Professor Snape's face looming over him.

To say he was surprised would be an understatement. Within seconds Draco found himself wide awake and sitting up so fast it made his head spin. It all came back to him: the rumor, his confrontation with Granger, and shit, he had completely skipped his morning classes. What was wrong with him? Was he subconsciously trying to get himself into more trouble?

"Mr. Malfoy," Snape began as soon as he saw Draco was awake, "I was hoping you could enlighten me as to why you seem to have slept through my class this morning as well

as your Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. I do hope you have a good reason since your absence resulted in the unpleasant event of Lupin and his mutt paying me a visit.”

“Professor,” Draco started, embarrassed at the slightly groggy quality of his voice, “I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me. I…”

“I have a very good idea of what came over you, if the current topic circulating the rumor mill is any indication. I’ll also wager it has a good bit to do with a certain meeting in the Headmaster’s office I was told I needed to attend today after classes. Am I correct, Mr. Malfoy?”

During the entire conversation Snape’s expression had not changed and Draco was getting nervous wondering where the Professor stood on the subject, not to mention that it was a little uncomfortable chatting with his Head of House while he was still sitting in a pile of his rumpled sheets. Draco managed to find his voice after a moment, “Yes sir, that would be correct.”

“Well then,” Snape continued, “If I am to know how I will proceed at this meeting I expect you to answer one question for me very truthfully: are you responsible for Miss Parkinson’s pregnancy?”

Draco shook his head emphatically, “No sir, absolutely not.”

Snape nodded, “I thought as much from what I saw this morning, but I needed to be sure.”

“So, you believe me?” Draco asked nervously.

“Would you rather I didn’t?” Snape countered looking slightly amused, “I assure you Mr. Malfoy, I know the students in my House very well. The rest of the school might not have noticed, but with the change in you over the past year I found it hard to accept what is being said as truth.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Draco finally said, surprised that the usually unsympathetic Potions Masters had actually bothered to pay that much attention to him.

“I wouldn’t be thanking me just yet. There is still the matter of your skipping classes,” Snape looked at him critically for a moment. “However, given the circumstances, and the fact that you do look a little worse for wear, I will limit your punishment to one detention where you will be organizing my potions store for the year. From now on, remember that if you are feeling unwell, a visit to Madame Pomfrey is required. Is that clear?”

Draco sat stunned for a moment, was he really getting off this easy? “Yes sir.”

“Good. Now, seeing as how I already wiped the smile off Black’s face by informing him you were ill and missing classes with my permission, I suggest you get some more sleep. A house elf will be up with some lunch shortly. If you find you cannot sleep, then I suggest you get started on your first potions assignment of the year which I have left on your trunk. I will expect it to be handed in on time.”

With no further comment and without waiting for any reply at all, Snape turned and walked out of the seventh year dormitory. Draco sat for several minutes afterward in both relief and astonishment. A weight seemed to lift from him as he realized that at least someone would be on his side this afternoon. He never imagined that someone, especially Snape would stand up for him. He had a feeling that a good part of Snape's willingness to step in had to do with his love of pissing off Sirius Black, but Draco had no complaints.

Before he could think about it any further, Draco heard a POP! And on his night stand was a tray with a large bowl of chicken noodle soup, brimming with large noodles and vegetables. Suddenly hungry, Draco quickly consumed several spoonfuls before a pang in his stomach reminded him to slow down. He managed to eat half the bowl before losing interest in the food and sitting the tray aside. It disappeared with another POP a moment later.

Try as he might, Draco just couldn't seem to get to sleep again after that. His stomach was pleasantly full and he felt much more relaxed, but he just couldn't seem to drift off despite the lethargy he could still feel in his limbs. After a half hour, he finally gave up and reached for the assignment Snape had left him. It was only a brief review of last year, but it took him longer than it should have because he kept checking the time. Despite feeling better about the situation and now being clear minded enough to realize he could deal with this, the panic from before was still clinging to the edges of his thoughts.

Forty-five minutes before the meeting, Draco gave up. There was no way he could just sit and do his homework. He needed to move around. Getting up, he took one glance at himself in the mirror and had to look twice. Snape had been kind to say he was 'a little worse for wear'. Draco's skin was pasty and his hair matted down from a fitful sleep. He had bags under his eyes, which looked hazy with fatigue. Maybe it wasn't just stress. Maybe he was coming down with something.

A quick shower at least made him look marginally better. At least his hair wasn't sticking up and the warmth from the water had brought some color back into his cheeks, but no one looking at him would deny he was a little under the weather. Checking the time again, he realized it was time to leave. A hard knot formed in the middle of Draco's stomach, but he tried to ignore it as he made his way to the Headmaster's office. He was thankful to find Snape waiting for him as he passed the Great Hall and together they made the rest of the journey.

Neither of them said anything until they reached the statue that guarded Dumbledore's office. Draco had never seen it in action and watched in fascination as Snape muttered, "Wine Gums," and the statue leaped aside to reveal a staircase. Following Snape's example, he stepped forward and soon they were on their way up. The ride was smooth but the odd movement made him slightly dizzy. Snape must have sensed it because the Slytherin felt the man grip his shoulder. The dizziness did not completely abate as they reached the

top. No, just as Draco felt he had his bearings, the door open and he saw that they were the last to arrive.

Five chairs were situated in the room facing the headmaster's desk, three of them already occupied by Black, Granger, and Pansy. Draco felt a firm pressure on his back and Snape gently urged him forward. As they passed by, Black and Granger gave him hard looks while Pansy continued to look down at her hands neatly folded in her lap. Draco found himself sitting next to her as he and Snape took the two remaining seats.

As soon as they were settled Dumbledore spoke, "Could I offer anyone a lemon drop? Tea? No. Well then, before we begin, are there any questions?"

"Yes Headmaster," Snape spoke up with a sneer in his voice, "I was wondering as to what purpose Professor Black and Miss Granger are here? From my understanding, this is a private matter that does not concern them."

"As I understand it," Dumbledore began, completely failing to respond to Snape's tone, "Miss Granger is here in support of Miss Parkinson and because of the nature of the discussion, I could not find fault with her being here."

"And I am here as an unbiased party in the discussion," Black spoke for himself.

"Unbiased," Snape snorted, "I doubt you know how to spell the word much less the meaning of it."

Draco knew he should not find the situation amusing, but seeing Snape play so easily with the other man's temper was enough to distract him, if only for a moment. Granger however, was not finding it funny in the least, judging by the displeasure written all over her face. As for Pansy, the Slytherin girl had yet to react at all.

"Gentleman!" Dumbledore interrupted before Black could reply to Snape's taunt, "Due to the changes in our society, the structure and procedure of all institutions are being watched carefully, even here at Hogwarts. Because of this, it is advisable that any meeting resulting from students within the same house being at odds, if you will, also include an outside staff member other than the students' Head of House. Both students must have individual representation. Now, shall we begin?"

The Headmaster delivered the last words in such an offhanded way that Draco almost didn't register the words until the man continued, "We are here today because of the rumor that Miss Parkinson is with child and that Mr. Malfoy is responsible for her in that respect. Should this be the case, both of your parents will be contacted immediately after this meeting. Now, Miss Parkinson here has already visited Madame Pomfry earlier today and I have been informed that she is indeed about two months along. Mr. Malfoy, do you deny that you are the father?"

Draco cleared his throat, "I am not the father." At his words he could see Granger glaring at him even as he comforted Pansy by placing a hand on her arm.

Dumbledore didn't pause or react, "Miss Parkinson, what have you to say about these rumors?"

Pansy didn't look up, "He is the father."

"You know well I am not!" Draco shot out at her.

"Mr. Malfoy, if you please. Now, Madame Pomfry has informed me that due to the early stage of the pregnancy, a paternity spell would not be accurate and it could also interfere with the forming magical energy of the child. We will have to wait until the end of the first trimester to use such a spell, however I am hoping we can solve this ourselves. It is obvious one party in this room is not being completely truthful. A truth potion could always be administered to at least Mr. Malfoy but I would rather get this settled now."

"Only one person really has reason enough to lie," Black interjected, but Dumbledore completely ignored the comment.

Draco watched the old man closely for any hint of what he was thinking. The Headmaster's attention seemed to be completely focused on Pansy's bowed head with none of the usual mirth in his eyes. He couldn't tell what the man was thinking, which only put him more on edge.

"Miss Parkinson, since your intimate contact with Mister Malfoy must have taken place over the summer, would you mind telling me how you came to be together? Did you plan to meet?" Dumbledore asked, not averting his gaze.

When Pansy spoke Draco could detect the slightest hitch in her voice. If he didn't feel so betrayed he would almost feel sorry for her. "No, we didn't plan to meet," she answered, "I was out with some friend from school and so was he. We met, had a few drinks, and..."

"Did any of your friends see you with Mr. Malfoy?" Dumbledore asked.

Pansy nodded, "But they had had a bit much to drink."

"Can any of your friend vouch for you during this occasion Mr. Malfoy?"

"There was no such occasion. I never went out with friends from school during the summer," Draco replied with conviction.

Black snorted, "I find that hard to believe."

"And I find it hard to believe you can count beyond you ten fingers and ten toes," Snape sneered. "Draco, can your mother account for your whereabouts this summer?"

"We stayed with Ben Pierce and his family all but the last two weeks of break. I spent nearly every waking moment with Ben's older brother. Ben can confirm that and I'm sure his brother would be willing to vouch for me," Draco replied, though he really didn't want to bring Ben or Ian into this.

"You are a hormonal teenager Mister Malfoy, do you expect us to believe that you never snuck out during the night to find a little companionship, with or without your friend?" Black asked icily. "It is known that you do not have a girlfriend at the moment to keep you occupied."

Even Granger looked a bit stunned at Black's bluntness, but Draco barely noticed. "No, Professor Black," Draco spat, "not that it's any of your business but no, I do not have a girlfriend. I have a BOYfriend. Girls do not interest me in the least, especially since I spent all summer with the man I am very much in love with!"

Draco was taking deep breaths to calm himself down by the time he was done. It wasn't until he registered all the surprised faces looking at him that he realized what he had just spouted out. Even Pansy was staring at him now. All of it –the interrogation, the betrayal, the fact that he had just outed himself to five people, most of whom he didn't even like– it was just too much. Without waiting for them to regain their senses, Draco shot to his feet and fairly sprinted to the door, not even pausing to take note of Pansy who was now sobbing something that sounded like 'sorry'.

Before he knew it Draco was back in his room, gasping for air as his lungs tried to catch up with him after his mad dash. He had passed a couple people in the common room, including Blaise, who had tried to talk to him, but Draco had walked right passed and slammed the door to the dormitory. Why? Why was this happening now when he actually had a reason to be happy, something to look forward to? For once, he hadn't done anything to anybody and this is what happened. He didn't want to be here. Why did he have to be here?

Still in the mix of his emotions, Draco practically tore his robe off of his shoulders, throwing it on the floor to be joined by his tie and shoes a moment later. It was only after he flung himself on his bed and drew the curtains shut that he felt comfortable enough to stop and let the adrenaline that rushing through his system fade away. He pulled his CD player from under his pillow and turned it on. The quiet strumming calmed him enough that he was able to make some sense of his thought and what he had just done.

It wasn't that admitting his sexuality was a bad thing. It wasn't that big a deal to most people, but it was the fact that he had let out something so personal –a tidbit that people could toss casually back and forth until it became yesterday's news. It was something he hadn't even told his mother yet because he and Ian had agreed to wait until after school so they could officially declare their relationship. Betrayed by a member of his own house. Violated by being forced to show a part of himself he wasn't ready to let out. The emotions ripped their way through his body.

Draco didn't know how long he laid there with his eyes closed and the music turned up loud enough to drown out the sound of his dorm mates if they came in. In the safe place he created for himself, hours could have passed. He had a sense of déjà vu when out of nowhere came a nudge on his shoulder, stirring him from his trance. Expecting to see Snape scowling down at him, Draco cracked an eye open. He nearly fell out of bed in surprise when he realized it was not Professor Snape. No, it was Hermione Granger.

CHAPTER TWELVE: Lion in the Serpent's Lair

Frantically, Draco scrambled into a sitting position against his headboard, never taking his eyes off of Granger who just stood there looking down at him. He sat there for a moment in shock before noticing the amused look on her face as she stared at him. It was only then that he realized his shirt was half undone and that he had managed to tangle himself up in the cord of his CD player. He could only imagine what he must look like and the fact that Granger was standing there being entertained by it really pissed him off.

"What the FUCK do you think you are doing here Granger?"

The Gryffindor girl got a pinched look to her face, "Is that really necessary?"

"Boys talk like boys in the Slytherin dormitory or perhaps you forgot you weren't with your perfect little Gryffindors," came the response from behind Pansy. It was only then that Draco realized that Blaise was also in the room. Blaise turned to him, "I'm sorry Draco, we tried to keep her out but she threatened the entire common room with taking away points."

"What, the noble Gryffindor abusing her Head Girl powers? I am appalled!" Draco said dramatically as he saw the growing discomfort on Granger's face.

"I am here because Dumbledore and Snape said I should speak with you," Granger replied not looking at him.

"I somehow doubt he meant for you to force your way into our house and assault Draco in his bed!" Blaise spat.

Granger rounded on him, "Oh, because he would have talked to me any other way? This doesn't concern you Zabini, go and let me talk to Malfoy!"

"I am in the room Granger and I say that Blaise stays. What, do you want him to leave so that later you can start some rumor about how I raped you or something? Forget it!" Draco said as he made his way to the door. He opened it, "In fact I would prefer it if you were the one to leave. You've already done quite a lovely job of ruining my year so believe me when I say that your work here is done."

Granger stood there looking uncertain as she glanced from Blaise to Draco and then the open door. When she spoke it was very softly and her tone gave him pause, "Please Draco, I need to speak with you and I think that once you hear it you'll be glad we spoke alone."

She could only have been talking about something that had happened after he stormed out of Dumbledore's office and despite his anger, Draco couldn't help feeling slightly curious and extremely worried about what had transpired. Suddenly, all the fight seem to go out of him and as his anger left him he felt as if it was willpower alone that kept him from collapsing in on himself.

"Blaise," Draco said when he found his voice again. "Please wait outside the door?"

His fellow Slytherin looked at him as if he were crazy, "You're sure?"

Draco shook his head no, "Please Blaise?"

Blaise finally nodded, but he gave Granger a look before he walked out, "I will be RIGHT outside the door. Draco, call me if you need anything. "

A moment later the door clicked shut and there was silence in the room as the Gryffindor and the Slytherin stood facing each other. Finally, Draco forced himself to move and he made his way to his bed. He pulled over a chair for Granger and motioned to it before taking a seat on the edge of his bed and stuffing his CD player back under his pillow.

"I didn't realize you liked Muggle music," Granger spoke, breaking the silence.

"Well I'm just full of surprises and you're finding your way into far more of them than I ever intended. What do you want?"

Granger sighed as he took her seat but didn't look at him, "Dumbledore and Snape insisted that I apologize to you and let you know what's going on."

"And what exactly would that be?" Draco asked, a little surprised.

"Pansy told us the truth after you stormed out. She said she met a Muggle boy when she was out with her friends and slept with him. Her friends had been drinking and talking with some other students they met up with and so when they saw Pansy leave with this blond Muggle, they somehow associated him with you in their drunken states. When her friends found her getting sick on the train and she told them she thought she was pregnant, they all automatically thought it was yours. Hence, the rumors," Granger explained calmly.

Some of Draco's anger resurfaces, "And she just let them think it was true? She knows how my father is right now and she just let people believe it?"

"Look," Granger said, trying to calm him down, "until the meeting this afternoon she never actually said it was yours. She just didn't deny it. You know that Mr. Parkinson's trial is coming up soon right? He's under magical house arrest until next month."

"Who doesn't know?" Draco snapped.

"Pansy knew that when the staff was informed she would be forced to say who the father was. If she said it wasn't yours she would have to explain about the real father and then Dumbledore would have to tell Pansy's parents. Knowing what Mr. Parkinson is on trial for, you must know how he would react."

Draco did know, and it made him scared for the girl he had known as a friend. It made sense now in a horrible, twisted way, but it didn't mean he forgave Pansy. "So," Draco began, "She was just going to let it happen and not talk to me about any of it? What now?"

Granger sighed, "She never intended to ruin your life, Malfoy. She didn't know it was going to go this far and it wouldn't have if I had minded my own business. If I hadn't gotten involved it would have remained a rumor that died down in a couple weeks, and by the time Pansy started showing enough for the staff to really raise questions Mr. Parkinson would

have been in Azkaban and Mrs. Parkinson's trial date as an accomplice would be underway. I'm sorry, OK? I heard the rumors and automatically thought the worst of you."

"You don't even know me," Draco said icily.

"I'd say that we're both guilty on that account, Malfoy," Granger replied.

"So, you never said. What now?"

"Pansy has a sympathetic Aunt who lives in Kensington. She'll hide her pregnancy for as long as possible. If she's lucky she'll make it to Halloween, but it will probably only be until shortly after her father's trial and then she'll go live with her Aunt. Dumbledore is arranging for her to finish her educations via correspondence. Until then, the staff will do their best to downplay the pregnancy. Dumbledore is afraid of what Mr. Parkinson will do if he finds out about Pansy. He might be under house arrest, but Mrs. Parkinson does everything he tells her to. None of us are supposed to talk about it if we can help it. We can't tell anyone," Granger explained.

"So everyone is going to go on believing I'm some asshole?"

Granger snorted, "This might be news to you but that's what everyone has always thought."

Draco scowled, "I'm sorry, but there are people I have got to tell."

"You can't! Everyone will find out!"

"They won't find out and besides, you can't tell me you weren't going to tell Weasley and Potter anyway. You three practically share a brain, though you might have gotten the bigger piece."

Granger looked guilty for a moment before sighing and shaking her head, "Who will you tell?"

"Only two people actually. First, there's Ben."

"He's a first year Malfoy. Do you actually expect him to not talk about this?" Granger asked with scowl.

"Like we've already agreed Granger, you don't know me, I don't know you and let me tell you now that you definitely do not know Ben. He won't say anything to anyone if he knows how important it is," Draco said, making it clear by his tone that there was no room for argument.

Granger sighed, "Fine, who else?"

"My lover," Draco answered, not looking at her.

Granger nodded, "Understandable. I guess that covers everything then."

"Not quite," Draco said, stopping her before she could stand. "No one else here but Ben, Harper, and everyone in Dumbledore's office today knows anything about my sexuality or the fact that I'm in a relationship with Ben's brother. Our parents don't know either. I want to keep it that way and that includes not telling Weasley and Potter. Understood?"

Granger stared at him for a moment, "Fine Malfoy, but I hope you understand that I still don't like you. I can't believe I'm keeping your secrets after everything you've ever said and done, but I will. It changes nothing though."

Draco felt his stomach clench as he was reminded of how much bullshit he would still have to put up with, "That's perfectly fine Granger, because I can tell you I still don't like you either. You're as much of a know-it-all busybody as ever before and I don't care to expend the energy necessary to rid myself of that notion."

Granger looked slightly befuddled at his bluntness, but only nodded. They stood there awkwardly for several moments before the Gryffindor finally excused herself and left. A moment later, Blaise entered, looking at him curiously.

"What was that all about?" Blaise asked.

Draco just shook his head and fell limply back onto his bed.

Blaise stared at him hard, as if he could figure it out by examining him hard enough, "What have you gotten yourself into Malfoy?"

"I don't know," Draco answered, before rolling over and feigning sleep until dinner.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Sick and Tired

Draco dropped his book bag beside the desk before nearly collapsing into his chair. He couldn't believe he had only been back to Hogwarts for a week. Five days of classes and he was already exhausted. Thankfully, in a couple of hours he would be free for the weekend and the first thing he planned to do was fall back into bed and sleep until evening meal.

His first year he remembered that he had gotten mildly ill shortly after coming to Hogwarts. Madam Pomfrey had said it was a wonder the entire Slytherin house didn't constantly fill up the infirmary. Children needed sunlight to stay healthy, not clammy, damp, dim dungeons. Draco was beginning to think that maybe this was the same thing. Things had calmed down slightly since that first day of class and his appetite had made a slight comeback, but he never seemed to be able to get enough sleep. Not to say that stress didn't play some role in how he was feeling. He had plenty of that to go around with no mistake.

With no new insight into Pansy's pregnancy, the issue was slowly turning into old news, but that didn't keep most of the school from avoiding him or staring at him like a puddle of spilt dragon's snot. At least Granger had not confronted him again. Instead, she and her other two superheroes limited themselves to watching him as if they couldn't quite figure him out. Unfortunately, it was beginning to look like he had more of that to look forward to.

Seventh year Ethics of Wizarding and Muggle Relations and joy of all joys, despite the classes being a complete mix of the houses, the golden trio had all managed to land the

same class period. Little wonder with Sirius Black being the professor. Draco saw them shoot their usual searching look in his direction before turning to each other and continuing on with their normal conversation. Meanwhile, the Slytherin looked around hoping to spot one of his fellow house-mates.

"Wow, you look almost as green as Neville when that potion exploded on him yesterday," came a voice from behind.

"Fuck off Blaise."

"And as charming as ever too!" Blaise exclaimed, "Seriously, you don't look good. Maybe you should ask to be excused and go see Madam Pomfrey."

"Like that would happen," Draco snorted, "you do remember who is teaching this class right? Besides, I just need some sleep and I'll be fine."

"Let's hope so. You do remember that Quidditch practice begins next week, right? You were voted Captain at the end of last season and we need to replace some players," Blaise reminded.

Draco groaned, "I remember now."

The other Slytherin just shook his head, "Well, let's just focus on one thing at a time. There aren't many from our house in this group. Think we can survive?"

"We'll have to. Have you heard anymore about what this class is supposed to be?"

"Not really," Blaise replied, "I know the Governors came up with the idea at the behest of the Ministry. Everyone is scared to death that the remaining Death Eaters are going to rebuild their numbers and find a new leader. This is probably just another way for the Ministry to keep track of the political views of the students and their families."

"Did I ever tell you how much I hate politics?"

Before either boy could say anymore they caught sight of Sirius Black entering the room. By unspoken agreement, they both went silent.

"Good afternoon class," Black said as he reached the front of the room. "As you all know, this is Seventh Year Ethics of Wizarding and Muggle Relations. You will be meeting here once a week for this class. Since you are my last session of the week I am sure you have all heard some rumors but I believe most of the students are still uncertain as to what exactly will be going on here. Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Will there be a text for the class?" Granger asked.

Black smiled at her before turning to address the entire room, "That is a very good question. Because this is a new subject there is no one text that will cover everything you will learn. Therefore you will receive a syllabus with a list of passages that need to be read. These texts will be made available on short loan in the library. Everyone understand? Good."

With a flick of his wand the blackboard rolled to the front of the room as Black continues, "Now, before we go any further, this is not an extension of the Muggle Studies class you are also now required to take. This class is meant to examine the two parts of the

world and how they interact apart and together. First, we have ourselves here in wizarding society. Second, we have muggle society," with a wave of his wand the board was divided between muggle and wizard sections.

"But sir," a Ravenclaw interrupted, "The muggle's don't know we exist, our interaction with them is one sided."

"Ah, in many ways that is true. It is also an ethical question. Is it right for us to manipulate the majority of muggles into not knowing we exist? We know it is necessary for our safety and most of us do not take advantage of the situation, but then, some do as we saw in the war. We will be discussing this at great length later on in the class. We will talk about ethical issues concerning our relations with muggles first and different approaches, some academic and some not, as to how to get on with them. Second, we will look at issues in wizarding society as well as issues in muggle society and compare and contrast.

"The point of this class will be to raise the awareness of our responsibility in wizarding/muggle interactions and to realize that our societies face many of the same problems. Now, how many of you were raised or partially raised in a muggle environment? You are the ones we will depend on to give a more balanced, in-depth view. Today will be brief. We will talk about things we know and like about muggle society and why successful interactions with them might be worth while. We will also brain storm possible issues we might like to discuss later if there is time."

Draco was able to focus until Black let the discussion be turned over to the class. After that, the voices of his year-mates turned into background noise and it was all he could do to keep his eyes open. In a last, valiant attempt to stay awake, Draco concentrated on writing down notes on what Black had said and also what his classmates were going on about, but it wasn't long before his quill was leaving meaningless symbols on his parchment as his eyes insisted on rolling back to hide under his eyelids.

"Mr. Malfoy!"

Dizziness caused his vision to blur, his head shot up so fast. Draco could taste the acid in the back of his throat as his stomach protested the sudden transition from being asleep to being awake. He swallowed, "Sorry Professor Black, what was the question?"

"Participation will be part of your grade Mr. Malfoy," Black said as he walked to stand in front of Draco's seat, "You have yet to contribute to the discussion and falling asleep in class will certainly not help you. Five points. Now, tell me one thing you find interesting about Muggle society."

Draco swallowed again harder. He was not going to throw up, "I find muggle music rather interesting."

Black stared at him for a moment. "Yes, muggle music has much to offer," he finally said, before returning to the front of the room.

Draco would have collapsed back in his chair in relief if he wasn't still fighting with his stomach. He had thought the nausea had finally left him along with those stomach pains, but it seemed to be back.

"The point of this discussion," Black continued, "though not academic, actually illustrates one view some wizards take regarding muggles. The way muggles live and manage without magic is seen as rather novel by many. Some wizards collect muggle artifacts, some find their politics interesting..."

Black went on and Draco forced himself to pick up his quill, but found himself again with the problem of concentrating, only this time it was his stomach and not his tired eyes that kept distracting him. He felt a hand on his arm and looked up to see Blaise giving him a worried look.

"You look like you're about to be sick, Draco," Blaise whispered, "I think the only reason Black didn't chew you out more is because he was afraid you might vomit on him."

"I just need to lay down, I'll be fi..."

"Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Zabini, is there something you would like to share?" Black asked loudly to catch their attention. He didn't look happy.

Before Draco could think of anything to say, Blaise jumped in, "Draco isn't feeling well sir, could I help him back to the Slytherin common room?"

Draco kicked the other boy under the table, but his friend didn't react.

A variety of different emotions played over Professor Black's face as he looked hard at Draco, but apparently the Slytherin looked pathetic enough to warrant some sympathy, "I will let you leave because I know you were unwell earlier this week. However, this will not be a common occurrence. I suggest you make an appointment with Madame Pomfrey if you do not feel better by evening meal. Mr. Zabini, I believe he can make it back on his own. You will be responsible for making sure he has notes for the rest of class."

Stunned was a good word for the looks on his classmates' faces. Draco probably had a similar look on his as he began to gather his things, but then, Black letting him leave was probably the only indication of an apology he would receive after the meeting that had taken place earlier in the week. Stubborn Gryffindors.

Blaise gave him a concerned look and whispered, "see you after class," as Draco stood to leave. Draco didn't trust himself to respond as the motion caused his head to spin and his stomach to do a flip. He managed to nod even as he walked swiftly from the room. He would NOT vomit in front of the entire class.

One hand clutching his bag and the other pressed to his stomach, Draco walked stiffly down the hall, trying to breathe evenly even as the acidic taste in his mouth grew worse. Somehow, he managed to remember that there was a bathroom just down the corridor. The moment he swung the door open he dropped what he was carrying and lost all pretense of not being sick. He reached the toilet just in time.

Who Would Have Thought

As he was revisited by what little he had eaten that day Draco felt his eyes water. Or at least that's what he told himself. He wasn't crying. The smell of what he had brought up made his stomach spasm painfully over and over again until he was left dry heaving, his arms barely supporting him and his face covered in a light sweat. Finally, he managed to calm himself. All he wanted to do was collapse on the floor, but somehow he managed to drag himself to the sink.

He tried in vain to rinse the taste out of his mouth and splashed water on his face and ran a wet hand over the back of his neck. Shakily, he raised his head to look at the boy in the mirror.

"You poor thing," the mirror said, "you look dreadful!"

Draco ignored it as he took in the sight of his white face, messy hair, and tired eyes. He shook his head at his reflection, "What's wrong with me?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Meet Me in Hogsmeade

Dear Draco,

I love you, but how do you get yourself into these things? Seriously, I know its not your fault and its just like you, the real you, to go along with something like this when you know its going to make you miserable. I don't like this. At all. I know you don't want to be at Hogwarts and it kills me to know that your last year is turning out to be even worse. But you're right. There is nothing you can do. I hope Pansy knows how lucky she is, though she's no where near as lucky as me.

This Hermione Granger...is she the same girl who was with Potter that night at the pub? I can't believe she just came into your dorm and found you in bed! No girl would have gotten away with that at Durmstrang. All the important bits were covered right, or do I have to hex her? Those bits are only for me to see!

Now that I'm done being possessive, I thought I would let you know that the lyrics you sent were perfect. You definitely got it just right this time. Attached is a recording of the music we put together to go with it as well as a version with the lyrics in it. I think the entire thing just needs a couple of adjustments here and there. Let me know what you think.

There are a couple of pubs near Hogsmeade that are interested in having us play for them. I'll be visiting them at the end of your second week of school, which is conveniently just in time for your first Hogsmeade weekend. I miss you so much Draco. I still wake up sometimes and wonder why you aren't in bed with me before I remember that you're at school. We will make it through this year Draco, we have to, but damn it! All I want to do is kiss you.

But speaking of making it through the year, I do expect you to make it without starving yourself. Ben wrote me about how you're barely eating. I know things aren't going very well, but you can't let it interfere with your health. Don't make me force feed you in Hogsmeade. You know I will.

Now that I've gotten myself all worked up, I had better go. Eric and Kayd just got here to practice. They've been making kissy noises at me since they realized I was writing to you. I guess that's there way of asking me to give you a 'hello' from them. Take care of yourself and don't forget that I love you.

Love,
Ian

Dear Ian,

I am so glad you will be coming next weekend. It's been a week of classes and it feels like I haven't seen you in a year. I want to kiss you too.

As much as I would be amusing by you hexing Granger, you can rest assured that my virtue has not been compromised. And possessive is right. Not that I have much room to talk. I plan on employing Eric and Kayd to make sure any rabid fan girls keep their filthy hands off when I'm not there. I am the only one who gets to put their filthy hands anywhere on you.

On a more serious note, I don't like Pansy situation anymore than you do, though your evaluation of my character in this is clearly bias in my favor. I know what its like to have a, shall I say 'questionable,' family member (to put it mildly) and I feel for her, but if I thought for one moment that there was a way to make the entire school know the truth and consequently got off my back, I would do it. There have been no more actual confrontations but every time I enter a room heads turn...and not in a good way. Even my house mates are keeping their distance. All except for Blaise anyway. He seems to have replaced Crabbe and Goyle as my constant companion. I don't know what I would do without his friendship, even if his sarcasm is included.

One interesting thing did happen today. I wasn't feeling well in Ethics o f Wizing and Muggle Relations and Black actually let me leave to go lay down. I could hardly believe it, but I think it had to do with what happened in the Headmaster's office. He knows he was wrong and that was probably the only acknowledgment he'll ever give of that.

I know you have probably been going crazy since you read the part about my not feeling well. Relax. It's probably just a combination of stress and a stomach bug, though it's really starting to piss me off the way it comes and goes. I'm sure I just need some rest. I'll be fine and you'll see for yourself next weekend.

It's almost time for evening meal so I had better wrap this up. I do hope you let Kayd and Eric know that payback will come the next time either of them brings a girlfriend around. We will have to plot some sort of suitable revenge. Until I see you, stop worrying about me. I'll be fine and I love you too.

Love,
Draco

"I still say he's up to something."

Ben paused on the stairs as he heard the voices below him in the common room. He was lucky that most everyone else had already left the dorms so no one was likely to discover him eavesdropping. As long as he was quiet they wouldn't know he was there and Ben was very good at being sneaky. He was a little brother after all.

"There's something going on, that's for sure," the girl's voice drifted up to him. Ben thought her name was Hermione, though Draco called her Granger.

"Maybe you're both just being paranoid."

"After everything you've been through, how can you say that Harry? By now I would think you would know enough to be cautious," the girl spoke again.

"And this is Malfoy we're talking about! What's that saying? A leopard doesn't change its clothes!"

Ben scowled as it was confirmed that they were talking about Draco, but managed to restrain himself from jumping out and telling the three Griffindors exactly what *he* thought of them.

"Ron, I think Hermione's had you watching too much muggle TV and it's 'a leopard doesn't change its spots', not 'its clothes'."

"I suppose that makes more sense," Weasley conceded. Ben rolled his eyes.

"Whether it's correct or not, Ron has a point Harry. A person doesn't change just like that. I know you probably feel sympathetic since he was forced to come out, but ..."

Potter cut her off, "Why does my sexuality have to have anything to do with it? You think that just because I'm gay too that must mean I can't be objective? I'm not the one letting childhood squabbles run away with me!"

"Harry, did you just defend Malfoy?" Weasley asked after a moment of silence. Ben noticed how they didn't bring up his sexuality again. Despite his automatic dislike for all three, he silently rooted Potter on.

There was an exasperated sigh, "No, I'm just saying that we shouldn't see things that aren't there just because we don't care for the git. He hasn't done anything to us and even if he had something planned he'd have a hell of a time pulling it off with the entire school already pissed at him because of Parkinson. Besides that, didn't your parents go to a party at the Malfoy's a few weeks ago, Ron? I doubt they are up to anything more than getting back into the good graces of the Ministry."

"Even so Harry, there are still Death Eaters out there and I don't think its being too unreasonable to ask for us all to be cautious," Granger said primly.

"Besides mate," Weasley added, "Doesn't it worry you that Malfoy is being all chummy with those two first years in our house?"

There was a pause, "Maybe a little. The boy, the one Malfoy says is his brother or whatever, he's been joining the pre-tryout Quidditch drills. I don't know what to think, but the boy can handle himself on a broom, even if it is one of the school's."

Ben found himself smiling at the compliment. He'd have to tell Draco.

"Speaking of flying, have you noticed that Malfoy has barely been in the air during Slytherin's practice?" Weasley asked.

"No Ron," Potter said sharply, "I don't spy on Slytherin's practice."

"That is interesting though. Malfoy hasn't looked well recently and last week Sirius did let him leave class early," Granger commented.

"And he's been looking positively green at meals," Weasley said happily.

Ben had had enough. Without making any noise he made his way down the last couple steps and turned the corner into the common room, "I didn't know it was an honorable Gryffindor trait to take joy in another's misery. No matter how much you dislike them."

With that, the young Gryffindor turn on his heel and made his way out the portrait hole. The room was silent as he left. The look on their faces: priceless.



It had been years since Draco last saw Ian. Not literally, but it certainly felt like it. Draco had barely been able to sleep the night before as he thought about walking into Hogsmead and seeing his boyfriend's lopsided grin aimed his way. Despite the lack of sleep, he had been in such a good mood this morning that he had been able to ignore his nausea and even managed a piece of toast and some fruit for breakfast. Standing in front of the school he saw that the day was warm, the sun was shining bright, and for the first time in two weeks, life was good.

It had been another week of school and the strange sickness had still not left him. He had thrown up two more times and had come close on a few other occasions. Both times he had somehow managed to hide his illness from his house mates. Even so, Pansy was looking at him sadly every time they were in the same room and Blaise had started hovering around him, constantly dropping hints that maybe he should see Madame Pomfrey. Draco knew he really should, but for some reason he was reluctant. It was as if some part of him believed that if no one actually discovered what was wrong with him, then it would just go away.

Quidditch practice had begun, but the weightlessness that came with flying certainly didn't make his nausea any better. He had taken to flying laps with the rest of his team at the beginning, but made the excuse that he wanted the chance to observe everyone as a reason to stay on the ground. Draco didn't know what he was going to do when real practice started after the tryouts. He could only hope he was feeling better by then.

"Nice day for a Hogsmeade weekend," came a voice from behind Draco. He turned to find Blaise standing behind him, observing him carefully. "You're feeling better," the other boy added.

"Yes," Draco replied, agreeing on both points.

"I'm glad. I don't like seeing you look so miserable," Blaise went on.

Draco caught the odd tone in his friend's voice and turned his own critical eye Blaise's way.

"So, I guess if you're feeling better maybe we should celebrate with a trip to Honeydukes and maybe a butterbeer," Blaise suggested.

Trying to keep his expression neutral, Draco manages to reply, "Sorry, Blaise. That sounds great but I'm meeting someone in Hogsmeade and we'll be spending the day together."

Draco almost smacked himself in the head as he realized that he still hadn't told Blaise about his relationship with Ian. He just wasn't used to confiding in anyone but his lover, but now it appeared that his inability to trust had led to his hurting his friend's feeling. Not only his friend, but the only one Draco felt he could talk to at school if he needed.

Blaise was a Slytherin and rarely let his guard down in front of others, but now the disappointment was clear on his face. He covered it quickly. "Oh, so that's why you're feeling so much better," he replied jokingly.

"You could say that," Draco said with a slight smile before he forced himself to become serious. "I'm really glad we're friends Blaise."

Their eyes met and Draco could see that Blaise had gotten the message.

"So am I," he finally said.

"We'll talk later," Draco promised, "but I have to go. Eat lots of chocolate for me."

"You don't have to tell me twice!"

They were both smiling as Draco began to walk towards Hogsmead. He would have to tell Blaise about Ian and hope that their friendship remained intact. Blaise and his constant teasing tone had become a lifeline for him and there was no way he could willingly let that go.

These thoughts only put a slight damper on his mood as he walked briskly toward town. He made good time despite being so tired recently. He quickly located their agreed meeting place and stood out of the way beside a small side alley. He waited. And waited. It was five minutes past their planned meeting time when Draco started to worry that he had somehow gotten the location wrong. He was just about to take a walk up the road when he felt an arm go around his waist. A strangled sound came from his mouth as he was pulled into the alley.

A moment later, he felt hard brick against his back as he was lifted and held against the wall. He caught a glimpse of familiar auburn hair before a warm mouth was pressed against his own and he let his eyes close in pleasure. Draco pulled back slightly, "You're an ass!"

Ian laughed, "But you still love me."

A growl was the only reply Draco gave before he pulled Ian back to him and kissed him hard. The familiar movement of their lips pressing together had been missed greatly and they exchanged small kisses for several minutes as if they were both trying to memorize that simple sensation of their lips touching. They both groaned when Draco pressed his tongue into his lover's mouth. Ian sucked on it gently, reminding Draco of how it felt to have other parts of his body serviced by that mouth. In the corner of his mind, the Slytherin knew that making out hot and heavy in an alleyway was not considered respectable behavior, but the raging hormones of a teenage boy could easily bypassed such pieces of logic, especially with Ian entering his mouth, lapping playfully at his tongue and lips.

Both of them seemed to have forgotten their surroundings as Ian pressed Draco harder against the wall and helped the blond wrap his legs around his hips. Gasping for air, Draco lightly nipped at the neck in front of him as Ian's mouth worked to mark him. Teeth grazed the oversensitive spot on his neck and Draco groaned, his eyes half-lidded as he lay his head on Ian's shoulder. A second later, his eyes opened wide as he met the gaze of someone across the street. They had been spotted.

The golden trio was across the street and while Granger and Weasley appeared to be arguing over where to go first, Harry Potter was staring straight into the alley, his eyes fairly popping out as he saw Draco Malfoy being ravaged against a brick wall. When they're eyes met they just looked at each other in shock.

Ian felt the body in his arms stiffen, "Draco?"

At the same moment Draco watched as Granger and Weasley noticed their friend's distracted gaze and started to look toward the alley when Potter fairly shouted something and drew their attention away. They talked briefly, then all three Gryffindors turned and made their way down the street.

"Draco?" Ian repeated as his lover finally relaxed in his arms.

"Let's go somewhere else," Draco suggested, finally finding his voice, "Potter just saw us."

Ian cursed, "Shit Draco, I'm sorry. I got carried away."

Draco just kissed Ian's cheek and grinned, "We both did. Now take me somewhere. Preferably somewhere private."

"Bossy," Ian said taking his hand. "I have my room from last night until noon."

Draco discreetly adjusted himself, but Ian saw it and grinned. The Slytherin scowled, "It's your fault."

"I didn't hear you complaining."

"No, but I will be if we don't get to pick up where we left off within the next five minutes."

Ian squeezed Draco's hand. No more words were exchanged as they fairly raced out of the alley.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Quiditch Anyone?

Harry Potter had seen a lot of things in his seventeen years of life, but one thing he had never expected to see was Draco Malfoy being ravished in an alley way. The blonde's hair was a mess and his pale cheeks flushed a deep rosy pink as some man held him crushed against the wall and feasted on his throat. Harry had definitely seen his childhood rival in a new light.

Not that he hadn't already been slightly confused over his feeling for the Slytherin. Despite what he might have told his friends he did feel sympathy towards the other boy. In some ways, he was even a little angry at Ron for pestering Hermione until she spilled what had happened both during the meeting with the Headmaster and when she had confronted Malfoy in his room. And she called him reckless. He was even more upset with Hermione for letting Ron's pestering get to her.

All those thought flashed briefly through his mind as he stared into the alley. He had been listening to Hermione, who wanted to go into the bookstore they were standing in front of, argue with Ron, who insisted they wait until later because if they went in now she would be there all day. He had just settled in for the argument that was sure to last at least the next ten minutes or so, when out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of movement in the narrow passage across the street. Over the past couple of years, Harry had been proud of the way he had learned to control his temper, but he felt it flare as he saw what looked like a guy shoving a slighter figure up against the wall. It reminded him too much of his own childhood for him to restrain himself. His friends didn't notice as he took a couple steps forward, ready to dash across the street, then stop in his tracks as he got a better view of exactly what was going on against that wall. It was no bloody fist fight that was for sure.

Two boys were making out heavily, the smaller of the two was clutching at the other with both his arms and legs. It had been a while since Harry had had any romantic prospect of his own and he felt himself firm up in his trousers at the sight. It wasn't until the smaller boy lay his head on the other's shoulder that Harry got a good look at his face. His eyes went wide as he made eye contact with Draco Malfoy.

"Harry?" came Hermione's voice, breaking into her friend's shock.

Harry looked up just as his friends started to look for what he found so interesting. "Wait!" he shouted. They were looking at him expectantly even before he realized he had spoken.

"Lets..." he stammered, "lets go to Honeydukes first before the third years clear it out. I thought I'd get Sirius some chocolate to go with the rest of his birthday present."

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look but didn't say anything as they followed their friend to Honeydukes. Harry walked fast, the image of his former rival still burning into the back of his retinas. It was all he could do to keep from looking back.

Later, as they were walking back to the school, Harry had almost managed to put the situation out of his mind until he caught sight of Malfoy walking alone behind him. Ron and Hermione were already ahead, bickering like an old married couple, so they didn't notice him drop back even further until he was walking next to the Slytherin. Harry noticed the stiffness in his gait and the relaxed set of Malfoy's shoulders told the whole story. The Gryffindor felt his cheeks warm and thought, 'that good, huh?' but kept that to himself. He didn't feel like being hexed today.

After several moments of silence, during which Harry wondered if the other boy even realized he was there, Malfoy spoke: "Thank you."

Harry looked at him steadily, never breaking eye contact. Finally, he reached up to his own neck and rubbed it pointedly until Malfoy got the hint and tugged his collar up a bit higher to hide the vivid red mark on the base of his neck.

"You're welcome."

That night in bed, Harry found he couldn't get to sleep because of a problem in his pants. As he reached down to take care of it, he couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to be the one to put that flushed look on Malfoy's face.



His name was Tanner and though he was no Harry Potter, for a first year he was one hell of a Quidditch player. Draco waved the boy over to him at dinner.

"Hey Tanner, I know we didn't have a spot for you on the team, but I thought that you might like to go flying with some of us after dinner tonight."

The first year Slytherin looked at him suspiciously for a moment. "But I'm a first year," he said pointedly.

"You're still a good player and we want to keep you that way for next year," Draco told him. "Besides, my little brother and his friend will be with us too. They're both first years, though they're in Gryffindor."

Tanner finally nodded, "OK. Are we meeting at the pitch?"

"Yeah, about a half hour after dinner ends. That should give us time to get some good flying in before we have to be inside," Draco replied. Tanner told him he would be there and Draco moved to take his seat next to Blaise.

Though it was already the end of October and there had not yet been another Hogsmeade weekend, Draco found he was fairly content as he sat down to dinner. Mr. Parkinson had been sent to Azkaban at the beginning of the week with little hassle and Mrs. Parkinson's trial date was set for the following week. Pansy had made no grand announcement but it was now generally known, at least amongst the Slytherins, that Draco was not responsible for Pansy's condition. The Slytherin girl would be leaving to go live with her aunt on Halloween. Strangely enough, Draco felt sad when he thought of her leaving. He

was still upset about the entire situation, but now that things had died down he found that he really couldn't blame her. In fact, he found he was disappointed that they wouldn't be able to rebuild their friendship, and friendship was what both of them needed desperately.

Draco had talked to Blaise about Ian that Hogsmeade weekend that the other Slytherin had practically asked him out. It had been a tense discussion and Blaise had admitted that he had feelings for Draco but said that he understood. Their friendship had gotten even strong during the following weeks as they started opening up to each other about other things. Draco even let Blaise listen to some of the CDs Ian had sent him, but that didn't mean that he didn't see the closed-off look on his friend's face whenever he mentioned his lover. As a result, Draco mentioned Ian as little as possible, which became increasingly stressful the longer they were apart.

Draco's strange illness had also not so much gone away as he had learned how to cope with it. He still didn't eat much at meals but he had made a habit out of stuffing a couple rolls or apples into his bag to eat whenever he felt like he could keep something down. He soon found himself snacking every couple of hours and as a result he found he was less nauseous during most of the day, though eating this way had its own unique problems. He had been starving in Ethics that morning and had snuck a chunk of roll out of his bag. Unfortunately, Black saw and took points, reminding him that he should make sure he got enough to eat during meals as food was not welcome during class. Draco had stared down at his desk in embarrassment. Later, Blaise likened his eating habits to those of Pansy, who was still occasionally coping with morning sickness. Draco was not amused.

Pansy was having her own problems. Most of her friends had abandoned her after her pregnancy became too real to handle. It was fun in the beginning, when all the girls felt it as their duty to glare at Draco in support of their friend or when they were looking through *Baby Magic* magazine looking at all the baby clothes and asking Pansy if she thought it would be a boy or a girl. Now Pansy was in her second trimester and starting to show, her food choices were starting to become more interesting, and she had as much as admitted that it was some unknown muggle who had gotten her pregnant. Having a baby was more than just cute baby clothes and being a single mother with a bastard child was not something most Slytherin girls wanted to be associated with.

"Is he coming Draco?" Blaise asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Yeah, I told him we would meet him at the pitch," Draco replied as he picked at his chicken. He had eaten about half, which was good for him. "I just have to tell Ben and Harper where to meet us."

"Great, maybe some others from our team will be out there and we could play a short game," Blaise suggested.

Draco nodded, "It would be good to go up against Tanner as a seeker. I think he'll replace me next year."

"You really think Tanner could match you as a seeker?" Blaise asked as he finished his own meal.

"Either that or he'll make an awesome keeper. He's small, fast, and he knows his way around a broom. I think he can definitely match me," Draco replied as he too pushed his plate away.

"Well then," Blaise said, "let's go get our stuff so we can see if this boy is as good as you think."

Forty-five minutes later, they were on the pitch. Ben and Harper had just arrived and had resigned themselves to some evening flying when a couple Ravenclaws came onto the field. "Hey," one of them called, "You up to putting a quick game together?" Draco was only slightly surprised by the invitation from the other house. Now that there was no more speculation about the war, the fervor over quidditch had reached an all-time high. It was played whenever, wherever and with whomever as often as possible.

"Yeah, we were waiting to see if anyone would come out who was interested," Blaise called back.

"Well, we're interested and we saw some Gryffindors on their way out with their brooms just a minute ago," the other Ravenclaw said

On cue, a group of five Gryffindors appeared on the pitch and Draco noticed at once that Harry Potter was one of them. It had been almost a month since that embarrassing moment when Harry had spotted Draco in such a compromising position. They hadn't spoken since that day, but whenever they were in the same room Draco could feel Potter's eyes on him. The Gryffindor would look away as soon as Draco started to turn his way, but anyone worthy of the house Slytherin would be able to pick up on the strange vibes between them. They weren't fighting, which was good, but something was up even if Draco couldn't put his finger on it.

"You up for a game?" the Ravenclaws asked the new arrivals

The Gryffindors looked at the Slytherins warily for a moment before Seamus Finnigan answered, "Sure, who's on what team?"

It took only seconds for the teams to be decided. It was basically Slytherin versus Gryffindor except that each team had a Ravenclaw and Ben and Harper seemed to have become honorary Slytherins. They were short players so they improvised and each team would only have two chasers instead of the usual three. Draco had been tempted to give Tanner the seeker position, but Potter was looking at him again. Maybe if they got back to being rivals this awkward feeling would go away.

Tanner and Ben got the rest of the equipment from the quidditch supply shed and soon they were in position. Harper released the snitch for them before racing to take her spot. The game began.

It felt good to be in the air and playing a game. It was a nice evening and Draco enjoyed the wind on his face as he flew. In the past weeks he had been so preoccupied with his position as captain and on making sure his lunch stayed where it should that he had not been able to truly enjoy the game. Even with Potter sneaking glances at him every two seconds, Draco could only be amused at his lack of concentration.

As he flew, Draco tried to keep tabs on what was going on around him. At one point, he heard Ben's cry of "cobbing" and looked down to see Dean Thomas trying to elbow Ben off course as the first year clutched the quaffle securely against him. Draco had to smile. If you want to see Benjamin Pierce serious about something, put him in a quidditch game. The boy was surprisingly competitive, which probably came from spending most of his childhood playing the game with much older boys.

Draco watched as Ben started to veer just left of the other teams hoops, as if Thomas and the other chaser, Andrew Kirke, had succeeded in pushing him off course. A second before the first year pulled up on his broom, he pulled a Porskoff Ploy by letting go of the quaffle so that it fell straight down to Harper, who Thomas and Kirke had completely forgotten about in their attempt to cut off Ben. Within seconds, Harper was putting the quaffle through the other team's rings. The Ravenclaw keeper looked astounded. He hadn't expected two first years to out-manuever two seventh years so easily. Draco joined in the cheer that went up as Ben and Harper raised their hands in victory.

The game got more serious as the other team realized how much they had underestimated the first year chasers. Draco felt the pride for his brother and friend rush through him as they continued to hold their own. Weasley and Finnigan had upped the stakes as they smashed the bludgers into Ben and Harper's paths, but Blaise and the other Ravenclaw were giving as good as they got and before long it became more a competition of who could smash the bludgers across the pitch the hardest, rather than distracting the chasers. Blaise was practically snarling at Weasley as he sent the bludger careening across the pitch.

As for the seekers, well Draco had yet to catch even a glimpse of the snitch. So the game went on, with the Slytherin group still just barely in the lead. It was getting dark and Draco was wondering what they would do if they couldn't find the snitch as he spotted Snape walking out to tell them it was time to come inside. It was only as he turned back to the game that he saw it. Just barely out of his reach the snitch hovered, but in the space of a blink it took off towards the opposite end of the pitch. Draco was right behind it. Mere seconds later, he became aware of Potter flying at his side. Draco leaned forward on his broom, pressing himself as flat against the broom handle as the snitch led them in a chase, zigzagging them up and down, left and right.

It looked like they were just starting to gain on the snitch when it halted and then started heading right at them. Neither Draco or Potter reacted at first as the snitch passed

right between them to continued on in the other direction, but Draco didn't even think as he loosened his grip on his broom and swung so he was upside down. He let the shift of his body weight and his momentum pull the broom momentarily straight down until he was able to level out. In a matter of seconds he had switch directions, barely losing any of his speed, while Potter lagged momentarily behind. Draco smiled. He had learned that move from Ian.

His advantage didn't last long though, and soon they were neck and neck, arms straining as they stretched out over their brooms, just barely out of reach. The two seekers were tight on its tale, never taking their eyes off of the snitch, which was why neither of them had time to react to the warning cries from their teammates.

Draco heard Ben cry out his name even as the bludger came from underneath, hitting right where his belly lay flat against his broomstick. He was barely aware of the loud crack or the way the handle of his broom fell away from him. He couldn't breath! He was aware of nothing but the pain.

The next moments were a blur, but much later his friends would tell him what they saw. As Draco curled in on himself, the impact of the bludger threw him to the left and right into Potter. Knocked off balance, the Gryffindor tried to pull himself back up on his broom at the same time as he tried to wrap an arm around Draco's waist. Potter's broom was pulled downward by the dead unbalanced weight but for a brief moment it looked like they would be able to make a successful, if ungraceful, landing. That is, until Potter started to lose his hold on the Slytherin. When he attempted to regain his grip Draco howled in pain and unconsciously fought to relieve the pressure on his abused abdomen. Their friends watched as both boys tumbled down, the broom falling with them.

It is incredibly hard to hit two moving target with any spell, especially two boys who were falling as fast as they were, but Snape managed it when they were a mere fifteen feet from the ground. The speed of their fall was too much for the spell to handle, but it slowed them down and without it, Pomfrey would later say, neither of them would have made it.

Potter hit the ground first as he hadn't let go of Draco and somehow he managed to keep the other boy above him during the fall, hoping to spare the Slytherin any further damage. Draco hit a moment later, his shoulder ramming right into the Gryffindor's chest even as his stomach hit Potter's twisted knee. Neither boy cried out in pain. They couldn't. The last thing Draco saw before he lost consciousness was blood.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Hospital After Dark

Severus Snape had been a spy in the war, yet he could not recall anything that made his heart jump into his throat the way it did while watching two of his students plummet

from some incredible height. It had been a challenge to force the words Wingardium Leviosa from his mouth and it had been a miracle that he hit them with the levitation spell on the second try. They slowed down considerably, but that didn't keep his stomach from churning at the sickening thud that could be heard as they hit the ground, though he would never admit it.

Blaise Zabini was already holding back Ben Pierce and Harper Skelly by the time that Snape reached the unconscious pair. Both first years were sobbing and near hysterics.

"Mister Pierce and Miss Skelly, please run ahead to the Hospital wing and inform Madame Pomfrey that she will have two very critical patients very shortly. Hurry!"

Both first years were off like a flash, Ben only sparing a half glance at his friend's bloody form before he ran off. Snape tried not to focus too much on the blood coming out of Potter's mouth and nose. The boy was still breathing, if barely.

"Don't just stand there you fools," Snape shot out as he reached to begin slowly untangling the knot of limbs, "Someone inform Professor Black and the Headmaster!"

There was the sound of feet running away and then other hands were helping him gently pull the boys apart enough to be mobilized without causing further injury. It was only after both boys were stiff and floating toward the castle that Snape bothered to recognize Weasley and Granger who were flanking their friend's form and Zabini who guarded Malfoy's side.

Madame Pomfrey met them halfway down the hall from the Hospital wing. "What on earth happened?!" she shrieked, "Never mind, never mind! Hurry!"

"All the blood is from Potter. He looks to have punctured a lung," Snape said as they steered the boys through the door. Weasley and Granger led Potter's body to a bed.

"If that is the worse injury between them, I shall take Potter first. There's some healing potion in the cabinet over there, it should keep Mister Malfoy stable until I've seen to Mister Potter's lung." Pomfrey replied even as she shooed the injured Gryffindor's friends away from the bed.

The familiar potion was easy to spot among the neat rows. At this point even Snape could not completely conceal his own worry. He stepped quickly to his student's side. The blood on the boy's clothing was not his own, but his complexion was deathly pale. Snape expertly tilted the boy's head and began to pour a thin stream of the liquid down the boy's throat. Almost immediately the boy began to cough. A moment later, Draco's unfocused eyes peaked out from under his eyelids.

"Hurts," he coughed.

Snape placed a hand on Draco's sweaty forehead. "Where does it hurt the most Mister Malfoy?"

"Hurts!" the boy sobbed as he clutched his stomach.

“Drink Mister Malfoy,” Snape commanded. His voice caught the youth’s attention and Draco’s blue eyes focused on his teacher as the potion was once again held to his mouth. The boy swallowed obediently.

The healing potion Snape had given him had the effect of making the patient go into a healing sleep. No sooner had the last drop left the bottle then Draco’s eyes became hazy. Snape let out a sigh of relief the moment he realized the boy had dropped out of consciousness.

“Thank goodness you’re here, Severus! I’ve got Potter’s lung on the mend. There’s plenty wrong with him still, but the lung will take the most energy,” Madame Pomfrey said as she bustled over to Draco’s bed. “How is Mister Malfoy? Is he stable?”

“He woke up before I gave him the potion. He was in a lot of pain and clutching his stomach,” Severus replied with a calmness that surprised even him. He hadn’t survived Voldemort by ignoring his instincts and he couldn’t help but feel that something was wrong. Very wrong.

“Quickly then, help me get him bare to the waist,” Pomfrey said crisply, reminding Severus that the medi-witch was also a master of her emotions. The fact that she asked for his help at all betrayed her worry.

They made quick work removing the robes, using a combination of magic and gentle tugging to keep from upsetting any injuries and also to prevent disturbing the magically induced sleep. Severus felt his own stomach flip at the sight of the large angry bruise on the young Slytherin’s side and abdomen. There were also bruises across his ribs, but those were only second rate compared to the purple mass below them.

“Merlin! Severus, you said he was actually awake? Get another healing potion and a salve!”

He didn’t stop to ask questions, just moved even as he was aware of Pomfrey casting diagnostic spells at the boy’s torso. Severus had already grabbed the needed items when he heard the medi-witch yelp and saw sparks shooting back out at her, as if her spell had bounced off Draco’s body. She tried again with the same result.

“What’s wrong with him?” Severus shouted at her.

Pomfrey was looking frazzled with her hair slightly on end from the sparks. “My spell isn’t working. I can tell that he’s in some advanced healing state, but the strength of the healing field is too strong to let me figure out the actual damage.”

“Then we must hurry! It has to have been a terrible amount of damage to need that much healing energy!” Severus said, feeling frantic. He wouldn’t admit it to anyone but his hands were shaking as he reached for the salve.

“I know Severus, but think! Where does that much healing energy come from? You gave him a simple healing potion. It would have taken a dozen potions and both of us casting spells to create a healing field that strong.”

Severus did think and his thoughts scared him. Without thinking he took out his wand and started casting the counter-curse to every dark spell he could think of. The energy had to come from somewhere.

"No," Pomfrey interrupted, "the energy is self-contained, it's not Death Eaters controlling him. The field rests where it originated, allowing no magic in or out until it has finished doing its job. It had to be either a potion or Mister Malfoy has shown himself to be a natural healer. I mean, he's a bright boy Severus but I never saw any sign."

The Slytherin shook his head. He hadn't either, but Pomfrey was right; what other explanation was there? "What do we do now?"

"We hope the Headmaster arrives soon and then we wait for him to wake up."

"I don't like this. There has to be something else, something we haven't thought of," Severus said.

"Even if we knew, there is nothing we could do until the field breaks down and disperses the energy. But you're right. There is something else and it feels like something I should have thought of, something I should know," Pomfrey shook her head and looked at him. "But I just don't know."

At that moment, Sirius Black came charging through the door, the Headmaster walking more calmly behind him. Severus knew it would be a long night.



It was like he was drowning and he couldn't figure out which way was up. He was suffocating and had only a steady rhythm reverberating around him and the pain he could not place to hang on to... yet, there was something else. There was something that belonged to him, floating and crying out in pain with him. He tried to find a way to draw it closer, to somehow calm the panic radiating from it and suddenly from him, but he didn't know how. The harder he tried the deeper down he went and the weaker he became. The pain began to fade and somehow he knew that this was the end. All at once he felt it as it stopped crying, stopped clinging to him, and stopped being. He cried out at the loss of its presence; the grief causing him to let go and he floated upward unnoticed.

In the hospital wing, tears welled up from under his eyelids as all the pain returned.



Dobby knew it was wrong to ears-drop on Dumbly, but something had happened to Harry Potter! The house elf had made his way up to the Headmaster's office after overhearing some students. He was now crouched and waiting as Dumbly and some professors entered the office.

Once the door was closed, he heard Snape begin to speak, "Now Black, before you make a scene here like you made while we were still in the hospital wing, no, Draco in no way caused your godson to get injured on purpose."

"We all know the Slytherins and Gryffindors don't get along, Snape. Is it really that absurd to think that this might not have been a complete accident?" Black fired back heatedly.

"Maybe I should start demanding that Weasley be punished. He is after all, responsible for the bludger that hit Draco, or is it only you Gryffindors who are allowed to make a mistake?" Snape shot back.

"Gentleman," Dumbly said calmly to Dobby's relief. "From what the students have already said this incident was no one's fault, however we will need to be able to have an official account of what happened both for the boys' guardians and for the school governors. Severus, you saw the whole thing correct? Good. Why don't you start at the beginning."

Dobby listened with wide eyes as the greasy professor explained how Harry Potter had tried to save his old little Master. He had not thought of little Master Malfoy in a long time but knew he had been mean to Harry Potter, yet he had helped him anyway. Dobby felt his chest swell as he felt even prouder to know the great Harry Potter.

"I know Pomfrey said they were both fine, Severus, but she seemed a little worried. You were there, are both boys going to be alright?" Dumbly asked.

"Potter should be fine as long as there are no complications with the healing of his lung. Draco is a different story. I don't think Pomfrey wanted to mention it to you with so many eager ears in the infirmary and I'm not sure I want to discuss Draco's well-being in the presence of anyone else," Snape said, with a glance in Professor Black's direction.

"Now see here, Snape! I..."

Dumbly interrupted, "Perhaps you are being overly harsh here Severus. This incident involved both boys and I believe as a teacher and as Mister Potter's guardian Sirius has a right to know everything that is going on."

Snape sighed but didn't argue, "We actually cannot figure out the extent of Mister Malfoy's injuries. I gave him a simple healing potion while Pomfrey first tended to Potter. He awoke briefly in great pain and managed to convey that it was his abdomen that hurt. However, once he was unconscious and Pomfrey attempted to find what was wrong with him, she found a magical field containing a great amount of healing energy encompassing that part of his body. All of her spells reflected back at her and we have no explanation for the energy field."

"Well, there must be some sort of dark magic at work then..." Sirius started.

"No," Snape interrupted. "I admit I thought the same thing myself at first, but Pomfrey says that the healing energy is from either a potion, one much stronger than anything we have here, or that Draco is a natural healer. There is no sign of either."

Dumbledore spoke after a short silence, "I am guessing that there is nothing that can be done in any case until Mister Malfoy has woken. I suggest gentleman, that we all get some rest. The boys will hopefully be mended enough so that we may explore the subject further tomorrow. I wish you goodnight."

Dobby's brow was creased in worry as he made his way to the Hospital wing to see Harry Potter. What if the greasy professor was wrong and it was dark magic? Dobby shivered. He had seen enough of dark magic not to like it while he still served Master Malfoy. No, Dobby would go down and see for himself.

The Hospital wing was dark when he entered and Dobby crept quietly towards the two curtained off beds in the room. He peeked through one and saw Harry Potter sleeping. Dobby saw that his breathing was steady and smiled, but before he could enter he heard a noise coming from the bathroom at the other end of the wing. Dobby hid under a bed before he bothered to look around. He saw the curtains of the other bed were partly opened and he could see the bed sheets rumpled on the floor.

There was a noise again and this time Dobby heard a sob and so he made his way to the bathroom. Whoever was in there had not even bothered to shut the door, nor pick up the pajamas they had taken off before getting in the shower that he could hear running. Being the dutiful house elf, Dobby went to pick them up only to stop when he saw what covered them: blood.



Draco couldn't pinpoint the exact moment that he had become conscious. The pain that seemed to engulf him had increased with every breath he took, like waves lapping at the shore as the tide began to rise. Then suddenly Draco was aware of the tears on his face as a single drop rolled down his cheek and into his ear. Instinctively, he turned his head to wipe it out. His eyes opened stiffly as his skin pulled from all the dried up trails on his face.

It was dark, but mostly because of the curtains he could see outlining his space. He was in the hospital wing. Why was he in the hospital wing? Why hadn't they made the pain stop?

He clutched at his belly as he felt it cramp. He couldn't seem to remember what it felt like not to have this pain. Only during his dream had it seemed to fade slightly, but just remembering the dream made Draco even more confused. It was only as the cramp eased that he noticed something else. He was wet.

Wet. Not like wet from sweat, though he could certainly feel a thin layer covering his entire body. No, there was definitely something very wet and warm between his legs and as

Draco reached down he could feel it soaked into his pajamas and into the bed sheets. He blushed in embarrassment. As far as he knew, he had never even had an accident as a child fresh out of diapers.

It was only as he brought his hand back up that he realized the substance was coating his hand and the smell... it didn't smell like urine. The smell was more metallic. Another cramp swept through him, but he forced himself to throw the sheets back anyway. He couldn't see within the dark enclosure so he threw his legs over the side of the bed, almost falling on the floor because of his rubbery knees. Draco felt more fluid run down his legs. He had to steady himself against the bed as he started to panic.

He never let go of the sheets as he walked the two steps toward the curtain, effectively pulling everything off the bed. The bundle nearly tripped him as it came free. As Draco reached toward the place where the curtain closed, a stray bit of light hit his hand and all he saw was red.

Red. Red from where his hand had reached down to feel the wetness in the sheets. It was an automatic reaction to jerk the curtain open and let the moonlight shine through. More red. It was on everything. On his hands, on the sheets pooled around him, soaked into his night clothes and when Draco looked down, he half expected it see it collecting on the floor as he felt more of it gush down his legs. It was blood.

Draco was bleeding. Why had they left him to bleed? He couldn't make a sound though he could feel himself shaking and desperately wanted to call out for help. Maybe it was a dream? Maybe all he needed to do was go to the bathroom and wash his face to wake himself up and when he looked again it would all be gone. He dropped the sheets and walked steadily to the bathroom.

Torches flickered on automatically as he entered. Draco looked down. Still there. Pain gripped him again. Another cramp. Another gush. He went to the sink and turned on the water. He started washing his hands and watched as the red ran down the sink. That's it. All he had to do was wash it off. The sink would take too long.

As Draco pulled off his clothes he found he couldn't breathe. It was only as he tried to catch his breath that he realized he was sobbing. He got his clothes off and went to the shower. His knees gave way as the warm water hit him. He hadn't realized he was so cold. He just sat there as he watched the water slowly make the dried red stains on his skin disappear. He watched the reddish water wash over the white tile and into the drain. Yet, even with the dried blood off of him the water refused to run clear.

Draco's sobs echoed in the room but he barely noticed as his hands began frantically searching for a wound. The pain was there, but there was no torn flesh. Where was he bleeding? He got up on his knees to watch the blood flow off of him. It ran thick and clotted from between his legs, coming faster with the spasms in his stomach muscles every few minutes. Draco watched and felt like he was dying.

He was so deep in despair that he didn't notice as someone else entered the bathroom. He didn't notice the small figure's look of horror and then realization. He only looked up when he heard mumbled words and then a flash of light, but he was too happy to welcome the unconsciousness that came afterward to really care.

The next morning, Draco woke to the sun. For a moment it reminded him of those mornings he would wake to the sun and to his lover's gentle prodding. He nearly expected to hear Ian's voice.

It was only as he shifted and felt the dull echoes of the pains from the night before that it came back to him. Draco's eyes snapped open and in a panic he threw back the covers to see nothing but pristine white sheets. No red. No blood anywhere. His nightclothes were spot-free and though he had just thrown them back, the bedding was all neatly tucked in place.

"Mister Malfoy," Madame Pomfrey said as she suddenly appeared. "For goodness sake, lay back! I can't believe you are awake already. That was quite a fall you took last night."

Draco said nothing but did what he was told and let Pomfrey prod him as she rambled on about dangerous sports. Surely if something else had happened she would have mentioned it. That means it must have been a dream. A horrible dream brought on by pain, panic, and a bad reaction to some healing potions. Even so, as Pomfrey ordered him to sleep and left him alone, Draco rested his arms across his stomach and fought back feelings of despair he could not explain.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: No Substituting a Mother's Love

While the Pierce family was considered an old family; wealthy and respected amongst even the most elite members of wizarding society, the family held no pretense at family meals. While some of their peers demanded the smartest dress and manners at all gatherings, none of that could be seen here. Indeed, to look upon them as they sat down to their breakfast together one could see no formal dress and amongst themselves an elbow on the Pierce table could pass without comment.

This morning Ian Pierce sat down at the table in loose casual pants after a quick shower. The band had played the night before at a muggle establishment. The crowd had been receptive but far more demanding than they were used to, leaving them all exhausted and a little in doubt about what they were trying to accomplish. Things in general had been difficult since Draco had gone back to school, and not just for him.

Ian smiled into his drink. Draco had such a way about him. He seemed to be able to read them and a disagreement amongst them that could have lasted hours could be extinguished by a mere comment from Draco in seconds. He always seemed to grasp what was at the heart of the matter, which Ian supposed, was how Draco also managed to make so many people at school dislike him when he used his talent to aggravate.

"Things a little rough in the music business? You look half asleep still." Ian's dad Holden said good-naturedly as he stabbed a bit of fruit with his fork.

Ian shrugged, "Last night was exhausting and the manager of the pub wasn't very friendly. If Draco had been with us he would have sweet-talked him into having us back. As it was, we had the place packed and he acted like we were a bother."

"I'm sure Draco would rather have been with you. I wish he was more excited about his last year of school." Narcissa Malfoy lamented.

Ian wished to refrain from replying and was saved from taking that conversation further by a brown owl gliding in through the open window. He almost ignored it when it landed in front of Narcissa, but wasn't that one of Hogwarts' owls? Yes, it was the same type of owl that delivered Draco's material lists every summer and most recently, Ben's Hogwarts letter.

Ian sat up a little straighter. Draco had his own owl. This letter was from the school. Something was wrong.

He watched as Narcissa Malfoy's face drained of color as she read the letter.



"I want to see my son!"

Albus Dumbledore observed the woman obviously distraught over her child, but kept his expression impassive. "Calm yourself, Mrs. Malfoy," he said kindly, "Your son is just fine and you may see him in a few moments. Would you please accompany me to my office?"

The lovely woman before him seemed to get hold of herself as she narrowed her eyes, "Unsupervised Quidditch, Headmaster? You're lucky I don't sue you and the school!" She said before turned sharply and waiting for him to lead the way.

Albus let his eyes crinkle in amusement. "I was expecting to hear that from you husband and not from you. I am rather surprised he is not with you."

Narcissa Malfoy stiffened at the mention of her husband, but replied simply, "Lucius is away on business."

Albus guessed that was at least a partial truth. Though wizarding gossip was still talking about the lovely party the Malfoys had hosted over the summer, spies for the order had informed him that not only was Lucius Malfoy still exhibiting suspicious behavior, but also that not all was well in the Malfoy marriage. Narcissa hadn't spent more than a month all together at Malfoy Manor since the beginning of the summer.

They didn't speak again on the way to his office, though Mrs. Malfoy gave a quiet snort at his current password of 'Maynard's Wine Gums'. They were his current favorite. When they reached his office however, the worry on her face returned when she saw Severus Snape waiting for them.

"Mrs. Malfoy, I trust you already know Severus Snape," Albus said as he motioned for her to sit.

The Headmaster watched as concern creased the mother's face as she looked at her son's head of house. "Yes, Severus, how are you? How is Draco?"

"He is truly alright, Narcissa," Severus assured her. "I was just with Madame Pomfrey and she said that he has already been awake this morning."

"Would you care for some tea, Mrs. Malfoy, while we wait for Madame Pomfrey to join us?"

"No, and I would much rather we get on with this so I can see my son. Is there no way we could start without Madame Pomfrey?" Mrs. Malfoy said wringing her hands impatiently.

Albus's eyes twinkled, "No need to wait any longer I do believe our dear Medi-Witch has just arrived. Do have a seat, Madame Pomfrey." The matronly woman came bustling in and took a seat. "Now then, the accident was explained to you this morning in detail I believe so let us get onto the point of this meeting. Madame Pomfrey, do please explain to Mrs. Malfoy what happened last night."

When the Medi-witch with the help of Severus had explained the situation surrounding the mysterious healing field, Albus once more spoke up to conclude. "We are all very much baffled by these events Mrs. Malfoy and we were hoping you might help us shed some light on them."

The face of Draco's mother was drawn with worry and confusion, "I don't understand what you expect me to know. I mean, Draco has always been sensitive to potions ever since he was a child. A weak pepper up potion for a common cold was enough to keep him up all night. Could that explain this?"

There was a silence as the three other member of the room shared a look. Finally, just when it looked as if Narcissa Malfoy would stand up and start demanding answers, Severus Snape spoke up, "Narcissa, what you have mentioned does confirm slightly a theory we have about what happened. What do you know about natural healers?"

"Very little. Lucius's grandmother was a natural healer. She came into her abilities rather young when her sister almost drowned. She was in hysterics but somehow managed to revive her sister even after she had been submerged for some time. However, it was seen as improper for a girl of her upbringing to get her hands dirty by healing commoners so her gift was never developed," Narcissa explained, beginning to get a sense of where this was going. "Do you think Draco is a natural healer?"

"It is a possibility," Madame Pomfrey said thoughtfully. "Usually a person exhibits sensitivity to potions or any spells or charms applied directly to their person. A touch of empathy is not uncommon either. The part we are having a difficult time understanding is what caused his abilities to manifest."

"Generally," Albus cut in, "the manifestation is triggered by a situation similar to the one you described; the natural healer is faced with a stressful situation where someone important to them is in danger of dying. Never, in anything we have heard reference to has the manifestation been triggered by a danger to the natural healer himself."

"It is our theory that if indeed your son is a natural healer his manifestation occurred prior to this event or that, somehow, when Mister Potter attempted to save him and then ended up injuring himself, that was enough to bring Draco's natural abilities to the surface. However, since Mister Potter had been removed from your son's range, the healing energy returned to him and did its work where it was needed most," Severus explained.

Mrs. Malfoy sat for a moment absorbing the information, then, "How do we know he's a natural healer for sure? What does this mean?"

"This could mean that your son has a very special gift, Mrs. Malfoy. Should he choose to, he could begin exploring his new talents by spending time with Madame Pomfrey or by doing extra study with Professor Snape. After graduation, a number of opportunities would be open to him. As for being sure, a few days helping in the hospital wing should give us enough time to observe and be sure of our conclusion. This is, of course, all up to young Mister Malfoy and his parents. We give you the option of being the first to discuss this with your son," Albus concluded.

Narcissa Malfoy nodded, "Take me to my son."



Draco stood in the bathroom once again. Why was he here? The pristine white of the tile was blinding as he turned around for a way out. There was no door, only more white tile. It wasn't until he made a complete circle that he saw it: one of the mirrors that hung over the sinks. It seemed to be the only thing to disrupt the endless expanse of white.

Before he knew it, he was in front of the mirror and staring at his own reflection. He too appeared white. His hair and his skin practically glowed far paler than he could remember it ever being before. Draco lifted a hand to touch his own face, which looked to be made of marble, when suddenly a new color exploded across the surface of the mirror.

Red.

It was on his hands. Thickly, it dripped from the hands of his mirror image into the sink. It filled the sink to the brim at alarming speed and slowly seeped down the sides and onto the floor. Draco looked down. He was naked. Blood was dripping down his legs and a sudden stab of pain sent him to his knees.

"Help me!" Draco tried to call out as blood started oozing down the walls.

"Why would anyone want to help you?" came a sneering voice from behind him.

Despite his pain, Draco managed to turn himself toward the voice. Where there had once only been a wall, there was now a doorway and in the doorway stood a familiar figure.

"Ian! Please help me!"

His lover's face contorted into a look of disgust, "Why would I want to help you, Draco Malfoy? Look at you. You have blood on your hands."

Draco sobbed, "Ian please! I love you! You said you loved me!"

Ian's eyes bore down on him, empty, "Loved you? Yeah, I gave you my love and what did you do with it? You killed it. Everyone was right about you."

"Please!" Draco sobbed as his lover turned from him.

Suddenly there were more voices and Draco looked up to figures in the sink mirrors looking down on him.

"Murderer!" they chanted. The room was filled with mirrors and all the Hogwarts students were leaning out of them.

"No! I'm not! Please help me!"

"Malfoy!"

"Murderer," they chanted.

"Stop it!" Draco sobbed.

"Malfoy!...Draco!"

"Please!"

"Draco, wake up!"

Draco Malfoy shot upright in bed despite the protest of his abdomen. Tears rolled down his face and sweat made the bed sheets stick to him, suffocating him as he struggled to escape.

"Dra..Malfoy, are you alright?"

A hand brushed his arm. Draco Malfoy looked up into the startled face of Harry Potter as he sat gasping from his nightmare. He was in the Hospital Wing. It had been a dream.

It was as he came back to himself that Draco realized who exactly it was who was looking at him nervously. Draco opened his mouth to say something. Something caustic? Something in gratitude? His brain hadn't gotten that far when the sudden adrenaline rush from the moment before began to take its toll and his vision became blurry and white around the edges.

"Malfoy! You're white as a sheet! Lay back!" Potter ordered and Draco felt himself being pushed back into his pillow. "Madame Pomfrey!"

A buzzing noise seemed to fill Draco's head and a hot prickly feeling spread over his limbs, but he pulled himself together enough to get Potter to stop his racket, "For the love of Merlin, Potter, can you keep it down? I'm fine."

For a moment Potter looked like he was about to continue calling for the medi-witch. "Are you sure? I think Madame Pomfrey must have gone to speak with the Headmaster. I can floo his office," Potter offered, gesturing toward the fireplace.

"It was just a dream, Potter. I think I'll live," Draco said with finality.

Potter suddenly looked awkward as he perched on the side of Draco's bed. "Alright then," he said. He stood up and started to amble back to his own hospital bed, favoring his right knee. It finally hit Draco like a bludger to the head as he watched: Harry Potter had saved him. When had their relationship gotten so messed up?

Draco felt his usual attitude slip away as he watched almost embarrassed by the way the Gryffindor took care in climbing back into his own bed so as not to irritate his ribs. For whatever reason, Harry Potter had risked his own life to save him, Draco Malfoy. The emotional instability of the past few weeks and the way most of the school had acted toward him since the beginning of the year reminded him that few people in Hogwarts would have done that for him. And here he was, still acting a git.

"Pott..um, Harry," Draco started as he sat himself up again, still feeling a deep ache in his abdomen. "I really should thank you."

"Don't say anything you don't mean, Malfoy," Harry said tonelessly.

Unexpectedly, Draco felt his blood boil at the comment. What was it about the other boy that got under his skin so easily? "I always say what I mean, Potter but if you can't see past who you think I am to accept my gratitude then that's your problem," Draco hissed.

The Slytherin was about to pull the covers up over himself and turn his back to the annoyance on the other side of the room when a calm voice broke through the tension.

"No Malfoy, look I... I'm sorry. Old habits die hard and we really are too old for all this bickering.

Draco sat for a moment staring at the ceiling before he nodded and propped himself up so he could look at the other boy, "I never thought I'd ever say something like this, but thank you, Potter. The way things have been lately, there aren't many people here who would have gone out of their way and gotten themselves hurt just to help me."

Harry smiled, "You're welcome. And I know you aren't responsible. For Pansy, I mean."

A scarlet flush came to Draco's pale cheeks, "You saw me. Us. That weekend in the alley."

"Well, yes, but to be honest I knew before that, ummm..." Harry looked embarrassed, "Hermione sort of told Ron and I everything."

"She promised!"

"I know. Ron hounded her until she spilled though. Not that I don't think it was horrible that she gave in."

Draco sat looking annoyed, "Well I..."

"Oh good!" Madame Pomfrey exclaimed as she came around the side of the curtain that blocked them from the main doors to the infirmary, "You're both awake! Let me have a look at you first, Draco, and then we'll see how Harry has mended."

"When can we go back to our dorms?" Harry asked from his bed. Draco recalled how much time Harry had spent in this infirmary in the past and thought it no wonder he was so anxious to leave.

"Heavens child, not until tomorrow morning at the earliest. That was some fall you took. You should both be thankful Professor Snape came along when he did," Madame chided as she bustled around, grabbing potions before finally pulling the curtain around Draco's bed.

"I feel fine," Draco half-fibbed, feeling awkward being so confined all of a sudden and Madame Pomfrey frowned at him as if she knew.

"I highly doubt that, young man. I expect if you attempted to sit up without those pillows behind you it would be a different story. Now lay back, dear boy."

Draco did as he was told and watched as the medi-witch waved her wand over his abdomen. He jerked in surprise as a puff of smoke came back up into the woman's face.

"You can relax, I won't hurt you," the matronly woman soothed.

Draco was ever more surprised at her tone, "I didn't think you were."

Madame Pomfrey looked at him, nodded, and then excused herself. Draco could hear her footsteps and they weren't going toward Harry's bed but back toward the door. He sat confused for a few minutes and then heard two sets of footsteps making their way back toward him. One set kept going toward Harry and then other stopped outside his curtain. A moment later the curtain opened and Draco felt emotion he couldn't explain well up in him at the sight of his mother.

Narcissa was dressed as impeccably as ever but Draco could see the worry in the lines around her mouth and the focus of her eyes as she examined him from just inside the curtain. He found himself remembering all the times when he had gotten upset as a child because of something that happened with his friends or because of his father. She would stand in the doorway to his room, contemplating his wounds before coming to him so softly he would find himself talking before she had even reached him, afraid if he didn't he would explode from keeping it all inside. But he didn't cry. Never before had he cried in any of those memories, but now as she took a step towards him he couldn't help himself.

"Mum?"

In the next moment she was with him and helping him up so she could pull him against her. Draco couldn't tell her what was wrong. Not because he didn't want to but because he didn't know. He wanted to tell her that, but she just shushed him and pressed his head into her shoulder. He clung to her in a way that would have embarrassed him before. He clung to her both in response to his whining stomach muscles and because this was the safest he'd

felt since the beginning of September. In response, the woman before him held her son as he cried his anguish and mumbled words to him as if no explanation were needed for her to understand.

"Mum?" he said again when he had calmed down.

"Everything's all right. I got a letter from the school this morning and came to see you. We have some things to talk about but that can wait a moment. How are you feeling?"

"A little better," Draco replied. He was feeling a little embarrassed now and moved back against his pillows. Narcissa took a moment to arrange them before letting him sit back and then started to fuss with the blankets until they were neat and comfortably tucked around him.

"I was very worried about you, Draco," She finally said.

"I'm sorry, mum,"

"Ian was very worried. Is very worried, I'm sure."

"Mum?" Draco asked nervously.

"He told us this morning at breakfast, Draco. He told us all. He practically begged me to let him along to see you," Narcissa replied, her face showing none of the signs Draco was watching for.

They were silent a moment until Draco had to ask, "Are you upset? Are Kate and Holden?"

"Disappointed might be a better word. You went through a lot of trouble to keep this from us, though I can't say I'm surprised that you two would end up as more than friends."

"We just wanted to be together."

Narcissa snorted, "You just wanted to be teenage boys together."

Draco felt his cheeks burn. Narcissa laughed and Draco looked at her. "I remember how it is at your age," she told him.

"We're in love," Draco defended.

Narcissa smiled at him and stroked his hair, "That's what Ian said. I don't doubt it."

"Why didn't he come?" Draco asked, shamefully on the verge of tears again as he remembered his dream.

"The letter I received this morning had a little more to say than just about your accident. It was decided that I should come alone to get everything settled and that Ian could come stay in town during the next Hogsmeade weekend. Not that he's needed our permission before apparently," Narcissa said, eyeing her son. Draco blushed on cue before turning serious again.

"What else was in the letter? The accident wasn't my fault, Mum. It wasn't really anyone's fault."

"No one's blaming you, Draco. It's just that something happened after you were brought to the Hospital Wing. Do you remember what happened a little while ago when

Madame Pomfrey tried to do that spell on you?" Draco nodded so Narcissa continued. "Your magic won't let her check your injuries, mainly the internal ones where the bludger hit you. Last night it was a healing field that prevented them from administering any healing spells to you. A little while ago Madame Pomfrey described it as a sort of protection barrier."

"I don't understand," Draco stammered, feeling lost all over again.

"The Headmaster, Professor Snape, and Madame Pomfrey all think you might be a natural healer."

Draco furrowed his brow and looked at his mother. "What?"

Narcissa smiled at his expression and kissed his forehead, "Lay down, darling, and we'll talk all about it. Be sure you'll have much to tell Ian when you next see him in addition to your misadventures in Quidditch."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: An unnamed Grief

Dobby sat quietly next to his little Master's bed in the Slytherin dorms as he had done for the past two nights. He waited until little Master began tossing; fighting against his nightmares. Dobby placed his hand on the sweaty forehead until the blond boy lay still as an easier sleep took hold.

Like any good house elf, Dobby had served his masters well during his time with the Malfoys. He had learned about the family from an early age. He knew that the old Master Malfoy had not always been a bad master. He knew that natural healers ran in the Malfoy family, though few had their healing powers manifest. Dobby even knew that little Master was not a bad boy, though stories enough from the house elves at Hogwarts told him otherwise. He also knew how to sense when something was wrong with one of his Masters and though Dobby no longer served the Malfoys, he had known when he had walked into that bathroom the other night what had been wrong.

Poor little Master! Dobby had put him to sleep and cleaned up the mess at his bed. He had heard that Madame Pomfrey's spells had not worked on the little Master, but Dobby was a house elf and had served little Master while growing up and he had helped him through the last pains of the miscarriage. Poor little thing! Little Master was far too young to be having a little one of his own. And playing quidditch! Little Master should know better! Now he was paying for it in his sleep, his natural empathy would not let the child's passing be over so quickly. So like a good house elf, Dobby watched him each night and helped him in his sleep.

But Dobby could not understand why no one said anything. Dobby had listened but neither Dumbledore nor Snape or Pomfrey had mentioned it to his old Mistress. None of the students were talking either. No one had come to comfort little Master to help him through

the loss of his little one. Could they not know? Why had little Master not told anyone? Pomfrey would not have been able to tell.

Dobby worried his hands. Maybe little Master had been afraid, like Pansy Parkinson. His old Master would not have liked his son baring a child. Little Master began to stir again and Dobby reached out once more to ease his sleep. No, little Master must have a reason for keeping his secret. Dobby would not tell. He would only watch and chase away the nightmares as he often had when little Master had been a little one himself.



Draco stood for a long moment with his palm pressed flat against the cool surface of the door that separated him from the hospital wing. He and Potter had been released from the Madame Pomfrey's care only three days ago and while it made sense that he would hold no positive feeling for his current destination, the dread with which he contemplated making that final step into the room made his feet feel permanently stuck to the floor.

The day his mother had visited had been pleasant enough. Or at least it was after the discussion of his and Ian's relationship. His mother had explained as best she could about what appeared to be his manifestation into a natural healer. Study and later conversations with Snape and Pomfrey would help confirm it and guide him in figuring out what to do with these abilities. Even the part of the day when he finally broke down and confided in her the situation with Pansy had been cathartic despite his mother's anger over the situation.

However, it was after his mother left, late in the evening, that his discomfort had started. It all began when he gingerly made his way to the bathroom for the first time to relieve himself. The moment he walked through the door his legs became weak and Draco was sure he was going to be sick. Maybe it was because the bathroom in the hospital wing reminded him of the one in his nightmare. In any case, the bathroom continued to have this impact on him for the rest of his stay and while in bed he remained restless and uncomfortable. Even the visits from Blaise, Ben, and Harper didn't help. Somehow just standing at the door was enough to make his stomach do flips.

Draco took a breath, "Madame Pomfrey?" he called as he entered the hospital wing and looked around.

"Just a moment, Mr. Malfoy," the medi-witch answered back, her voice drifting out from behind a curtain.

Draco forced his legs to move and take him to a nearby chair. It had already been a full day of class and he still had an essay to write for Potions before his day would officially be over, but every Tuesday, from now until dinner, his time belonged to Madame Pomfrey. He had a similar obligation on Thursday with Professor Snape. It had also been suggested he take some time to spend with Professor Sprout to learn more about the different plants used for healing. Draco's shoulders slouched under the imaginary weight of it all.

It wasn't that he wasn't interested in focusing his new abilities. In fact, the thought of his new training had been the only thing to get him out of bed that morning. His previous stress and anxiety over the term had evaporated into a feeling of numbness. He could care less about his classes, food had seemingly lost its flavor, and conversation just took too much energy to keep going. Even Ben and Harper's exuberance did nothing for him.

The only time emotion seemed to come to him would be in the early mornings when he would wake up to remember his dreams. They only seemed to fade in and out as he slept but he could remember flashes of scenes with blood and a white bathroom along with sharp pain and a feeling of loss. The only benefit to it all was that his nausea was gone even if his appetite had dropped off even more than before.

"Now Miss Parkinson, I have a report telling the progress of your pregnancy so far. Give it to your new medi-witch or wizard when you get to your aunt's and if there are any questions feel free to owl me," Madame Pomfrey was saying and she showed Pansy out from behind the curtain.

Draco looked up, more surprised at his own interest than he was at seeing Pansy here. Everyone knew that this was Pansy Parkinson's last week at Hogwarts. Early Halloween morning Professor Snape would escort his student into Hogsmeade where they would be met by Pansy's Aunt who had agreed to take her niece in and care for her and the baby until her education was completed. Draco sincerely doubted he would see Pansy again for several years, if ever.

Somewhere in the fog of his emotions he managed to find the feelings of regret he remembered having before the Quidditch accident. As Draco watched, Madame Pomfrey finished talking with Pansy and turned toward her office to retrieve her notes. That was when Pansy turned her attention to him and took a few hesitant steps in his direction.

It had been some time since Draco had been this close to Pansy and paid much attention to her. He could see that fatigue clung to her every feature, from the shadows under her eyes to her slumped shoulders. Maybe it was compassion for a friend. Maybe it was a sudden realization of how scared Pansy must have been in the past months. Maybe it was nothing more than the empathy he had been told natural healers possess. Regardless of the reason, Draco felt a swell of sympathy for the young girl in front of him more powerful than anything he had felt for days.

"Draco, I...", Pansy began as she stood in front of him. "I just wanted you to know how sorry I am for what happened. I was scared and desperate."

Words of forgiveness and reassurance floated through Draco's head, but caught in the back of his throat as he saw Pansy's hands move to cradle the swell of her stomach. An indefinable feeling kicked Draco in his. Sympathy evaporated leaving a tumult of other emotions that Draco couldn't hope to coalesce into anything meaningful: loss, guilt, fear,

pain, anger, sadness, shock, disappointment... They seemed to paralyze him until one came through stronger than the others and before he knew it, the emotion forced its way out.

"You're only apologizing now because you can afford to, Pansy," Draco spat. "Your words are cheap and are hardly repayment for what your actions took from me."

His teeth clenched at the end, biting off his last words partly in anger and partly due to his own confusion over what was coming out of his mouth. Draco felt his anger spike again as Pansy shrunk away from him, wrapping her arms more tightly around her middle as she took a step back in confusion. The feeling boiled inside him making him hot and uncomfortable in his skin. He made a fist, squeezing hard and the bite of his nails digging into his palm was all that was allowing him to hold his tongue. Pansy's mouth opened as if she were looking for words and this would have been enough for Draco to reach his threshold once more and spew out a few more angry words had Madame Pomfrey not chosen that moment to return.

Seemingly not noticing the tension in the room, the medi-witch came to stand between them, "Here you are Miss Parkinson. Now I suggest you rest until dinner. This is going to be a stressful week for you."

"Thank you," was the timid reply from Pansy, who seemed determined to look anywhere but at Draco. The young, pregnant witch didn't wait another moment before she fled the room.

Madame Pomfrey and Draco sat in silence even after the door had settled back on its hinges. The feelings of anger that had filled Draco to near busting had retreated with Pansy, leaving him exhausted and confused, but he knew that those feelings weren't gone for good. It wasn't until the medi-witch spoke that reality seemed to reassert itself.

"Empathy is often a part of the experience for natural healers. It seems that this is an ability you lack. While this does not rule out your healing abilities, Mister Malfoy, it does make me more reluctant to work with you. I like to give people the benefit of the doubt, but your little display makes it very hard from me. If I ever see you behave in such a way in this wing again, provoked or unprovoked, and especially with a patient, I will personally speak with the Headmaster about the wisdom of offering you this training. Do I make myself clear?" Madame Pomfrey finished in a steady, clipped tone.

Draco released a breath that seemed to deflate him, "Yes, Madame."



It was a little over a week now since Harry had spoken with Draco Malfoy in the hospital wing. Harry remembered feeling hopeful when he returned to the dorms as he thought of putting firmly to rest a rivalry that had existed since his early adolescence. Harry told himself that the happiness and contentment that had followed him were due to a sense of having made some peaceful progress in the midst of the tension that still existed in the

world after Voldemort's death. Despite wanting to put politics and the war out of his mind, this reasoning still seemed a better alternative than acknowledging what Harry suspected was a growing attraction the blond Slytherin. However, that attraction was suddenly being halted in its tracks.

"Watch where you're going!" Harry watched Malfoy snap at a first year that had gotten underfoot. The first year, a Ravenclaw, squeaked out an apology but Malfoy continued down the hall, the arrogance Harry remembered from past years once again evident in every step.

"Draco! Wait up!" Blaise Zabini called after his fellow Slytherin.

Malfoy didn't even turn around, "I'm late!"

Zabini halted, defeated as he stood there shaking his head. Harry had seen many similar exchanges over the past couple of days. He didn't understand it.

His curiosity had also not gone unnoticed.

"What are you looking at, Potter?" Zabini said, more calmly than Harry would have expected.

What was he supposed to say? He shook his head.

Zabini sighed aloud, coming closer, "I don't understand it either. He's never been this bad."

Harry couldn't believe Zabini was actually talking to him, "We talked in the Hospital Wing and he seemed alright then. When did this start?"

"I know you talked to him. That was one of the last things he told me before he started acting this way. At first Draco was just quiet. I figured he was tired. Then five days ago Pansy Parkinson came back to the dorms nearly in tears. A while later Draco showed up and has been this way since."

Harry's brow furrowed, "I thought the issue between Parkinson and Malfoy had been sorted out. Did they get into a fight?"

Zabini shrugged, "As far as I could tell, Draco hasn't been angry with Pansy for awhile, but now he's suddenly angry with everyone. He even snapped at Ben yesterday."

"He really looks up to Malfoy. How did Ben take it?"

"I talked to him afterward," Zabini replied. "He was upset, but he seems to think Draco will be better after this coming weekend."

Harry looked at him in confusion, "This weekend?"

"Hogsmeade weekend," Zabini said smirking, "I know Granger blabbed about Draco's boyfriend."

Harry's mouth shaped a soundless "Oh" of understanding even as he felt his cheeks grow warm as he remembered exactly what he had seen Draco and his boyfriend doing during the last Hogsmeade weekend.

“Surely you aren’t prudish about such things are you, Potter?” Zabini challenged, looking Harry up and down.

Not to be outdone, Harry returned the look “Would be a bit silly to be prudish about it considering my own interests.”

Zabini smirked, “Nice to know where you stand, Potter. I have a friend to look after, but maybe I’ll see you in Hogsmead this weekend.”

Harry watched Blaise Zabini walk away in the same direction Malfoy had gone before. Even as he admitted to himself that Zabini was also rather attractive, he had to ask himself why his life couldn’t ever be normal.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: The Burden of Empathy

A throaty gasp escaped Draco’s lip as his mind made the leap from sleep into consciousness. Even when his head stopped spinning he could still feel his heart trying to beat its way out of his chest. Still catching his breath, Draco moved aside his bed hangings to peer out at the dimly lit dorm room. There had been a noise when he first awoke and he wanted to be sure Blaise wasn’t about to descend upon him with his usual, concerned looks. Draco listened and scanned the room, but nothing moved and there was no noise other than the light sounds of sleep from behind the other curtains. The noise must have been his imagination—the last part of his dream as he came out of it.

Draco let the curtains fall back into place around his bed and sat back against his pillow, grimacing as his sweat-dampened pajamas clung awkwardly as he moved. He shifted and heard the crinkle of parchment. Carefully, he retrieved the parchment from the rumpled sheets. Last night he had fallen asleep looking at Ian’s most recent letter. There had been seven of them since the accident and they increased in frequency as each failed to gain a reply. Draco fully expected that Apollo would swoop into the Great Hall bearing yet another missive later in the morning.

He knew Ian was worried, but words failed him when he tried to write a reply. In this last letter, Ian informed him that he would be getting a room in Hogsmeade for the weekend and that if Draco didn’t meet him there, he fully intended to go to Hogwarts to find him. The ambivalence of his emotions concerning Ian’s visit was just one of many things weighing on his mind.

It wasn’t that Draco *didn’t* want to see Ian. In fact, he was sure that he had never wanted to see him so much in his entire life. It was simply that those bursts of longing were interspersed with intense feelings of shame and sadness.

Some of it Draco could almost rationalize away. He had felt a certain amount of nagging loss hanging on him since he first woke up after the quidditch accident. It was all

somehow attached to his nightmares, which had become more persistent while remaining vague and hazy. At certain times during his waking hours, he could push these feeling out of his mind for a brief while or bury them under the rational that it was just a dream. It was only ever a temporary patch, but an increasingly necessary one. However, it was the things that Draco could not rationalize or deny that caused the greatest amount of anxiety and subsequent ambivalence over seeing his lover.

Draco hadn't been able to look at Ben or Harper in a week. The day after his confrontation with Pansy, Ben had decided to continue in his efforts to make sure he was taking care of himself. Draco was reeling from recent events, confused over what had happened between him and Pansy that day in the hospital wing, and yet he could somehow feel the concern pouring off of Ben.

Something at Draco balked at this. First, because some part of him didn't feel he deserved so much concern and second, because he was already filled to capacity and incapable of handling another emotional interaction. Sitting there that day, talking to Ben, Draco felt like he was about to burst and he reacted instinctively. With anger.

There was no doubt that he had said more hurtful things to people in his seventeen years, but that hardly mattered when he saw the look on Ben's face. That look had brought him back to reality, but now Draco hardly trusted himself to be around Ben even long enough to apologize. Anger had become the only barrier between him and the feeling of being completely overwhelmed. He had never been so ashamed of himself and he didn't know how he was going to make it up to Ben or face Ian.

Rubbing his eyes, Draco pushed his curtains back once more. He stored the parchment in the bedside table with Ian's other letters, grabbed his toiletries and some clothes, and headed for the bathroom. It was ridiculously early, but Draco had learned from experience over the past days that trying to go back to sleep was useless. Instead, he spent the peaceful hours doing his homework and reading ahead for classes. The extra work from Pomfrey and Snape was time consuming and pairing that with his lack of focus during classes, not to mention his shaky performance on a broom these days, made these morning work session necessary.

Merlin! The thought of getting on a broom terrified him. Being the captain of the team meant he had been able to stay lower to the ground, commenting on his teammates' progress rather than dashing at break-neck speed around the pitch. Even hovering on his broom made him anxious as memories and emotion from the accident played in his head.

Draco had only been studying with Pomfrey for a short time, but he recognized the symptoms of post-traumatic stress that she had outlined. At the time she had been pointing out that healing of the mind was often as important as healing of the body. He was sure this was Pomfrey's way of making a point about his lack of empathy, but it actually relieved him to think that at least something going on in his head was explainable, if not immediately

repairable. The truth was that he couldn't avoid flying his broom forever. His teammates were already hinting at his lack of practice and Slytherin had a game not too far off. The reaction of his housemates and the school when he abandoned his position would be unavoidable, but no matter how much he might like to, Draco knew this was not something he could just get over.

Just as Ian's letters and the concern of Ben and his friends were not things he could ignore. He would find Ben and apologize and meet Ian in Hogsmeade. He would do it even if this tension threatened to crush him and then he would deal with that too.

It was going to be a long day.

Resolutions were easier made than carried out, Draco decided as he nearly stumbled to the Snape's office later that day. He had planned to find Ben at breakfast, but the boy had been late and by the time he arrived the post had come. There had been no letter from Ian as there had been everyday for the past three.

Rationally, Draco knew Ian had never smothered him when he was upset. He would see Ian in Hogsmead the day after next and Ian was just giving him the next two days to sort himself out before they saw each other. Irrationally, he imagined Ian's anger at his treatment of Ben, his annoyance at not received a reply to his letters, and his realization that being in a relationship with Draco Malfoy wasn't worth the aggravation. Rational and irrational argued all through breakfast, through his morning classes, at lunch, and on into the afternoon. Each made some valid points and despite knowing that Ian loved him, self-doubt had irrational ahead by five points. It was now time for his lesson with Snape, he still hadn't talked to Ben, and he was exhausted.

Draco knocked on his professor's office door. Snape's impatient drawl demanded he enter. This wouldn't be a pleasant evening. Thank Merlin he wasn't late.

Snape was stirring a potion on the far side of the room when he entered. He didn't even look up when he spoke, "There are instructions for the potion we talked about last week on my desk. Make it. Sprout gathered the ingredients fresh and those are on my desk as well so don't mess it up and don't take all night."

Draco knew better than to reply. Instead he did his best to keep his weariness at bay and think back to last week's private lesson as he read through the instructions. Natural healers are capable of healing the most grievous wounds even when regular healers would claim there was no hope, but that didn't mean they had an unlimited amount of magical energy to expend. Natural healers who weren't efficient with their use of energy or who didn't know their limits were in danger of putting themselves into a magical coma. This potion, the gavande potion, could be altered easily to be either ingestible or topical in application and contained ingredients that helped magnify a natural healer's applied magical energy.

While natural healers were rare and even fewer actually practiced, this potion was considered a staple in avoiding constant exhaustion and coma. The trick was that it had to be made by the healer who used it. Unfortunately, it also teetered on the edge of dark magic because it required a small amount of the healer's blood.

He wished he had paid more attention at the time, but Draco could only vaguely remember the heated situation involving the potion around the same time the whispers of the Dark Lord's return began. Panic prompted heavy regulation on all magical material that could even remotely be defined as dark. A long list of potions, including gavande, had been brought before the Wizengamot to be banned. The small population of practicing natural healers had protested, only to be accused of being dark themselves. The potion was banned anyway, and some of the healers with suspect family members had been coerced into serving the ministry and worked to the point of magical coma. Draco wasn't entirely sure if they had fully recovered or not. In any case, the potion had finally been re-legalized and Snape had insisted he learn it before "those idiots" changed their minds again.

Snape began muttering under his breath across the room. The Wizengamot were idiots, Draco decided as he started adding in the final ingredients to the potions. Did they really think that their use of people as a means to an end was more moral than the way the Dark Lord had threatened families? He dropped the palmarosa, meant to calm the mind of the patient, into the cauldron.

People were hurt and manipulated by the Ministry just as they had been by the Dark Lord and his followers, yet everyone overlooked that, while pointing fingers at the Slytherins, him, and his mother. Hypocrites! Draco pulverized the echinacea and tossed it in with a strong stir.

Snape growled in frustration and Draco frowned. He really couldn't say much for himself. The spirulina algae went in, to help produce blood cells. He knew he had always acted as an ignorant child with no control over himself, especially as of late. He picked up a sharp knife, ready to prick his finger on the tip for the final step. Of course everyone thought badly of him and soon Ian would as well, if he didn't already. He was so stupid!

Draco jerked back from the table in surprise at the biting pain in his hand. The movement made the pain worse and he looked down to see that he clutched the blade of the knife tightly in his left hand. Blood ran in rivers from between his fingers and it almost took a force of will to unclench his fist and release the knife. He couldn't see the cut with the blood flowing from the wound and dripping on the potion-stained floor. For a second, he remembered watching blood wash down the drain in a white shower stall...

"Stupid Child! You need a drop of blood, not your whole hand!"

Draco turned to see Snape approaching with a furious look on his face and suddenly he could barely draw breath. He clenched his wounded hand back into a fist, letting the pain ease the need to crawl out of his own skin.

"Stop! Stay away!" Draco heard someone gasp as he backed up into the table, causing his cauldron to slosh dangerously.

Snape stopped in his tracks, "Of course, Pomfrey would be fool enough to believe you have no empathy!"

The inescapable pressure spiked and dissipated to nearly nothing as Snape's eyes became unfocused for a moment and his features blanked. Draco gasped in relief and slid to the floor, not caring that he was sitting in his own blood. He could suddenly think clearly again without the overwhelming emotions taking over his thoughts.

"You're lucky I know occlumency. More than that, you are lucky that you were with me so I could recognize your condition before you drove yourself into shock or a coma," Snape said in an uncharacteristically serene tone. The Professor firmly took his fist and forced his fingers open. Draco nearly sobbed as the touch came without the feeling of being overwhelmed. He only realized how painful it had been now that it was gone.

"What's wrong with me? Am I losing my mind?"

"You're an empath and an incredibly strong one considering Pomfrey wrote you off as having no abilities. You're not going crazy, but I'm sure you feel like you are. You might have done serious harm to yourself, had you gone undiscovered. I imagine you might have given into self-mutilation to help ground the emotional confusion," Snape explained as he skillfully collected some of the blood from his hand and added it to the cauldron. "It won't be as strong since I added the final ingredient, but it will do for now."

A vial of the potion was held to Draco's lips and he drank automatically, still too dazed even to notice the muddy taste. Draco handed the vial back, "What do I do, Professor? How do I make it go away?"

"You don't make it go away Mr. Malfoy. You learn to manage it and it will become a gift rather than a burden. However, before we get to that you need to heal your hand and get an undisturbed night's sleep. Now focus before you get anymore blood on my floor," Snape finished without real bite as he moved away.

Draco could already feel the potion move through him, a calm replacing confusion. He took that small piece of clarity and focused on his palm. Spells weren't necessary, just concentration. Draco closed his eyes and thought of the dead cells that had once made up the unbroken surface of his palm. Cells were constantly being regenerated by the body and he called to them, persuading them to grow quickly and replace their fallen comrades from one end of the wound to the other, the dead cells washing away in the last drops of blood.

Something touched his hand and Draco opened his eyes to see a clean wet cloth pressed to his palm, wiping away the blood. When it was removed the only sign of the cut was the tender line of fresh cells that would soon blend away, not even leaving a scar.

"Well, Pomfrey taught you something. Drink this," Snape said as he thrust another potion at him.

Draco drank it automatically, recognizing the taste of ingredients generally used in strong sleeping potions, "Sir, I'll never make it out of here. I'll be out in minutes."

"Good," Snape answered as Draco's eyelids became heavy, "you won't be disturbed by wayward emotion when you are moved to the Hospital Wing."

"Hospital wing?" Draco slurred.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy. You will need to be quarantined until you have gained some control over your ability. By the end of the weekend you should be more comfortable around other people," Snape answered while reaching out to support his student's increasingly limp form.

Draco forced himself to protest through the haze, "Hogsmeade. Can't..."

Snape finally allowed his emotions free as his student passed into slumber, "Hogsmeade weekend is the least of your concerns, Mr. Malfoy." The Professor drew his wand in preparation to move his student. After Mr. Malfoy was resting soundly, Professor Dumbledore and Narcissa Malfoy would need to be informed. It was going to be a long evening.

CHAPTER TWENTY: Either Way

"There was no sign, Albus," Poppy Pomfrey protested. "After the way he treated Miss Parkinson, I can't see how he could possibly be an empath!"

Severus Snape sneered at the woman from his seat, "Just as there was no sign he was a natural healer you mean? If you saw what I did today there would be no doubt in your mind as to the boy's abilities."

"Now Severus," Albus said from his desk, "I have to say I can understand Poppy's skepticism. Why don't you explain what happened?"

"I told you, Albus, the boy picked up on my frustration and it overwhelmed him. I was working on the Wolfsbane potion after a run in with that Gryffindor mutt..."

"Severus," Albus warned.

"...and my anger occupied my thoughts. It wasn't until he sliced his whole hand open while making the gavage potion that I realized something was wrong. He panicked when I tried to approach. I used occlumency to clear my mind of my frustration. The boy nearly collapsed in relief for Merlin's sake! What more do you need to be convinced!"

Pomfrey shook her head, "Then why didn't his empathy manifest with his healing abilities after the accident?"

"I've been thinking about that as well," Albus replied. "We know that many empaths wrongly interpret the emotions they are sensing from others as their own. The weak emotions simply fuel the empath's own emotions while the stronger ones can directly influence behaviors. Perhaps this is what is happening to Mister Malfoy."

Severus nodded, "I agree. However, I fear there is something we have been missing from the beginning. I can't explain why, but it would appear that he is working through the stages one would expect after a loss or a trauma. I believe he was experiencing some sort of shock immediately after the accident, which is why we didn't notice his unstable emotions earlier."

For once Albus looked startled, but it was Poppy who replied, "Other than the accident, there is no evidence of either, Severus, but it could have a large impact on Mister Malfoy's mental state if it is true."

"Severus, you're the boy's head of house; what possibly could have happened to the boy to explain this?" Albus inquired.

"Other than the issue with Miss Parkinson earlier this year and the accident, I haven't a clue. However, we still haven't completely explained what prompted the manifestation of Mister Malfoy's abilities. There have been reports of him lashing out in anger at other students, but he appears to be holding just as much anger and guilt for himself. As I said, I can't explain it, but I would guess Mister Malfoy has perceived a loss or failing on his part and is experiencing grief," Severus explained.

Silence settled in the room as the three professors considered their charge. Finally Albus rose from his seat, "Well, I don't have to tell either of you that we will need to keep a watchful eye on Mister Malfoy and of course work with him so that he can separate his emotions from those of others. I will contact Mrs. Malfoy to let her know about this development. I will also inform the other professors of Mister Malfoy's unique situation in case his needs any accommodations as he masters his empathy, if that is indeed what it is. Severus, I take it you will be leading him through meditation as well as some occlumency to help him along?"

"Yes Albus, I will leave Mister Malfoy some texts to look over in the morning and then work with him after classes. I suspect now that he is aware of his ability, separating his emotions from others' will come naturally as it does with most empaths. I am sure he will be ready to attend classes again by Monday."

"I will inform Mrs. Malfoy of our plans for her son. And Poppy, you will ensure Mister Malfoy is shielded from other patients and gets proper rest?" the Headmaster directed.

"Yes Albus, I will head back now since the sleeping potion will be wearing off soon," Poppy replied.

"I will come with you," Severus added.

"Very well. I would appreciate an update in the morning. Goodnight to you both."

As the three professors left the room, a small figure emerged from behind a tapestry. Dobby worried his hands as he thought of his little Master. The professors didn't understand! They didn't know about little Master's little one. Dobby knew about little

Master's letters from his boyfriend and how he agonized over seeing him. Now there would not even be a Hogsmeade weekend. Dobby could only hope that his former Mistress would somehow know how to make things right.



Draco was floating.

More accurately he was suspended in warm water. The water was pitch black except for a point of bright, but tightly contained light that shined just before him. It stayed close to him and he knew it was something precious. He carefully reached out to it and a surge of warm emotion filled him. This was his to protect and keep.

Out of the darkness came a wave and Draco felt himself being jerked harshly back and a pain accompanied it like a punch in the stomach. Through it all, he hung on to the little light. He looked at it even as a familiar pain throbbed inside him.

The light dimmed and began to sink, slipping through his fingers.

The back water was now a deep ruby color as Draco swam toward his charge. The light grew dimmer and the pain more intense the harder he swam. Suddenly the light seemed far away. It glowed brightly for a moment as if in farewell, before blinking out.

The pain was overwhelming and Draco closed his eyes and curled in on himself. Only now did he realize he was no longer floating. He opened his eyes to see he was on his knees in a white tiled shower watching blood flow down a drain.

"How could you!" a familiar voice echoed off the walls.

Draco looked up to see the cold face of his lover.

"Ian, I tried!"

"You should have tried harder!"

"Forgive me! What do I need to do for you to forgive me?"

Ian looked at him hard, "You need to wake up, Mister Malfoy."

Draco shot upright so fast his vision was nothing but white specks for a moment. When he recovered enough to take account of his surrounding he saw Professor Snape standing next to his bed, one hand on the back of Draco's neck, the other hand reaching for a potion Madame Pomfrey held out to him.

He was in the Hospital Wing again. It was just a dream.

"Drink this, Mister Malfoy. It is only a calming draught," Snape prompted.

Draco complied without comment. Madame Pomfrey took account of him as he handed the empty container back.

"My goodness you're soaked! We'll get you a new pair of pajamas and change your bed clothes," the mediwitch said, bustling into action. Draco shivered as he realized he was covered in sweat. "Can you make it to the lavatory, dear?"

Words caught in his throat as he remembered that white tile. He found himself shaking his head slowly. He didn't want to go in there.

"Severus, you'll have to help the poor boy," Madame Pomfrey instructed as she somehow managed to produce fresh sheets and a neatly folded set of pajamas.

"No! I... I..." Draco stopped as a shock of alarm followed by worry rolled over him. The emotions matched the expressions on the two adults' faces as they reacted to his outburst. Draco had never seen Snape show so much emotion, or maybe he was just reading it better because he could actually feel it.

"Can't I just go back to my dorm?" He started again more calmly. "I don't think I could handle the attention I would get for staying here another night," which wasn't entirely untrue. "

"That is out of the question!" Madame Pomfrey started.

"But I've been in the dorms for weeks already. It can't hurt me to stay there until I learn how to control this, especially now that I know what is happening," Draco reasoned. He was surprised at his own calm tone, carefully formulating his words in response to the emotions coming from the healer.

"Nevertheless, we shouldn't take any chances," Pomfrey replied firmly.

Draco's calm started to slip at the thought of staying here when Snape finally spoke. "Madame Pomfrey, please floo the Headmaster and inform him that I will be taking Mister Malfoy back to his house," Snape said in a bored tone.

"But Severus,..." Pomfrey started. Draco could feel her dislike for this suggestion. She was ready to argue.

"I am of the belief that staying here will cause Mister Malfoy more stress. Not to mention the way he responded to our emotions a moment ago indicates that he is already well on his way to separating his feeling from those of others. I have no doubt he will be using our emotions to manipulate us all in no time," Snape finished with a pointed look at Draco.

Despite the slight reproof from Snape, Draco looked back at Pomfrey in anticipation. In truth, he was starting to get tired from volleying his concentration back and forth between them, but focusing on them meant he could keep his own emotions at bay. Pomfrey looked at Draco and he felt her realize the truth in Snape's argument.

"Fine, but I expect you to take full responsibility, Severus."

"Of course. I am his Head of House."

Pomfrey turned and headed for her office to floo the Headmaster, leaving him alone with Snape. Draco was aware that early in the conversation the professor had reined in his emotions, much as he had during the incident in the potions room. This was a welcome break from sorting out and interpreting emotions, but it also made Snape that much harder to read. Already he was using his empathy instinctively.

Draco decided to start cautiously, "Thank you, Professor Snape."

"I'm sure you are thankful, but in all honestly, I really had no wish to deal with the emotional meltdown you were headed for if we made you stay here," Snape replied, to the point. The surprised must have shown on Draco's face, because the Professor continued, "Just because I am not an empath does not mean I can't tell when someone is about to have a panic attack. While I myself can understand not wanting to spend more time then necessary in Madame Pomfrey's company, do you mind telling me what could possibly justify that emotional state?"

Draco swallowed even though his mouth seemed suddenly dry. How was he supposed to put it into words when he couldn't even make sense of it in his head? Snape was looking at him impatiently and he tried to swallow again in preparation to speak. "I... It was a dream... a nightmare. It started the last time I was here."

Snape gave him a measured look. "Continue."

"There was blood... on the sheets. Then I was in the bathroom and there was blood there too."

"And, you are sure this was just a nightmare, Mister Malfoy?" Snape asked.

"What else could it be? Everything was back to normal when I woke up. It's just the nightmare keeps coming back. I don't feel comfortable staying here," Draco replied.

"Did anything else happen in this nightmare of yours?" Snape asked. Draco hoped it would be the last question.

"It's my fault. The blood, I mean. Everyone is there blaming me, especially I..." Draco paused and took a breath. "I have to go to Hogsmeade this weekend, Professor."

Snape stared at him for a moment. Though he was blocking his emotions somehow, Draco knew the Professor was putting together the pieces of the puzzle and that he had sensed what Draco left out. From the incident with Pansy in the Headmaster's office, Snape knew he had a love interest and would no doubt be able to piece together that Draco needed to reassure himself that this person didn't blame him for this imaginary crime in his nightmares. There was more to it than that, but Draco hoped it would be enough for the Professor to understand and let him make the trip into town. Even if he did think he was being childish and melodramatic.

"That decision is ultimately left up to the Headmaster and your mother. In the meantime, you should change into your clothes for the walk back to your dormitory. There is a short exercise in clearing your mind I want to teach you in case you become overwhelmed among the other students and it is getting late. I suggest you hurry."

With that, Snape stepped back and drew the curtain around the bed.



After coaching Draco on some simple meditations, Snape made his way to the Headmaster's office. Dumbledore offered the customary lemon drop then got straight to the point. Apparently, the hour and the complexity of the situation were getting even to him.

"Misses Malfoy is very worried that her son has been returned to the dormitories so soon. I assured her that I trusted your judgment, but frankly Severus I share her concern."

"While I admit it is common practice to quarantine strong empaths until they get a grasp on their abilities, I felt in this case that it would be less stressful for Mister Malfoy to return to his house than to remain in the Hospital Wing," Severus explained. "I believe something happened there the night of the quidditch accident that has had lingering affects."

Dumbledore's expression grew more somber as Severus related his conversation with young Mister Malfoy.

"Draco is rapidly learning to differentiate his emotions from others so I believe he will be fine in his dorm, though we may want to excuse him from tomorrow's classes. It would be more stressful to his emotional state to force him to remain in the hospital wing," Severus finished.

"I agree. And there is no indication of what might have happened that night?"

"Draco claims he woke later in his hospital bed with everything, other than his injuries, as it should be. He sincerely believes it to be a dream."

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully, "It worries me that something so severe could happen in this castle, to one of the students, without my knowledge, but I have a feeling the truth of this matter will come out in time."

"There is one other thing, Headmaster. Mister Malfoy seems insistent on participating in Hogsmeade weekend. Of course I told him the decision would be up to you and his mother."

The Headmaster's expression lightened. "Since you mentioned it, Misses Malfoy was also very concerned that her son be allowed to go to Hogsmeade this weekend. So insistent, in fact, that she is having a carriage take young Mister Malfoy Friday evening to an Inn for the night. I have a feeling that a third party is eager to renew their acquaintance."

Dumbledore smiled as he finished and Snape surprised himself by almost returning it.



It was just after dinner on Friday and Draco was making his way down to the entry hall of the castle to meet the Headmaster. A bag for the night was packed and shrunk to fit in his pocket. He worried for a moment over whether he had everything he needed, but too

much had happened for him to mistake his current tension for worry over his luggage. He was on his way to see Ian.

There was no doubt that Draco now had better control over his emotions. Snape's explanation and meditation techniques had seemingly flipped the switch that allowed him to separate his emotions from others. The Professor had mentioned that strong healer-empaths had some empathic ability even before their full talent manifested. It was possible he had dealt with juggling others emotions on a much smaller level for most of his life.

"It would certainly explain your unprecedented ability to set Griffindors on a rampage against you with so little effort," Snape had said, by way of backhanded compliment.

Draco had related it all to Blaise, for once feeling able to talk about what was going on. The other boy had subtly implied that now maybe Draco would be more himself. That maybe his emotions wouldn't be all over the place. Draco didn't know how to tell him that most of his recent emotions had been his own; their intensity merely fueled by the energy of the emotions around him. He really wasn't sure what 'more himself' meant anymore or if he would ever be back to his so called 'normal self'. A twin sensation of being hollow and yet filled to capacity made him feel like he could barely relate to the person he once was, much less anyone else. The worrying part of it was that he didn't think it had anything to do with his healing ability or his empathy.

Would Ian be able to see the difference?

Would he even be able to love him after the way he had been acting to Ben, Harper and everyone?

The litany of worries was becoming such a familiar state that Draco slipped into them as he made his way to the front entrance, almost blind to his surroundings. So blind he didn't see the first year barreling around the corner from the Great Hall until it was too late. The impact sent Draco stumbling back to keep himself from falling. The first year practically bounced off of the Slytherin and hit the floor.

The boy, a Hufflepuff, looked at him with wide worried eyes. Draco could sense his fear and it made him recoil. His mind searched for a reassurance in response to the emotion, but before the words could take form, a disturbingly familiar voice filled the air.

"Ten point from Slytherin! I should take you to the Headmaster right now. Bullying a first year!" Hermione Granger came from behind him, her mouth pinches in a scowl, her disgust for him clear.

"I am going to see him now, Granger. It was an accident. Neither of us was watching where we were going." Draco wasn't about to press his luck with the girl.

"I... I was running down the corridor," the first year said quietly. Draco was thankful for the confirmation even if the boy was only doing it out of fear of retaliation from him.

Granger looked at the boy for a long moment, "Return to your common room then. Your Head of House might be asking you about this later."

The boy, having learned his lesson about running, set off at a swift pace with a hasty shake of his head and another worried glance at the Slytherin. The child's footsteps echoing in the corridor was the only sound for a long moment.

"Were you born cruel?" Granger started in a tense whisper. "This time might have been an accident, but what about all the other times? A few people seem convinced that there's another side of you, but what is the difference either way if everything you say and do is hateful, poison! I know about the way you treated Pansy before she left and I know how you've been treating Ben and Harper who you claim to care about. You get away with it, but one of these days it will all come back to you and I hope I am there to see it!"

Granger turned on her heel and walked away, leaving Draco stunned. His brain beat a rhythm in his skull in time with his heart. The short confrontation had been an exercise in keeping her emotions from melding with his own even as the intensity of her hate for him bowled him over and sent chills down his spine.

Draco wiped the sweat off his brow as he numbly continued his journey to where the Head Master was waiting for him. The old man didn't mention it if he thought his student seemed a little stunted in his reactions. He simply relation the instruction about the Inn and the carriage and sent him on his way.

The rocking of the carriage didn't soothe his headache. The confrontation in the corridor had affected him physically and had also started a fresh wave of guilt rolling over him. Draco spent the journey to Hogsmeade trying to calm himself and hoping to find a resolution to the uncertainty surrounding his lover, his identity, and his worth.

