

# *The Depths of Winter*

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**Summary:** Four years after getting out of Hogwarts, Harry lives alone in the Muggle world. He has turned his back on the magical world – until one day, when Draco Malfoy gets into a car crash before Harry's eyes and ends up paralysed in a wheelchair. HP/DM slash.

**Warning:** Slash

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*This story is dedicated to Laura, for being my beloved little sister in every way but by blood, and to Jen, for being the best friend a girl could have, keeping me motivated through the months it took me to write this.*

*The Depths of Winter*

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*The Depths of Winter*

By Cosmic

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# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter one* *Journey of a thousand miles*

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It was a beautiful day; the kind of day when birds sang, the sky was blue and people all around were smiling.

A man with messy black hair and bespectacled green eyes made his way down the street. Harry Evans, twenty-two years old and a university student, felt fairly happy. It was Wednesday afternoon, which meant half the week was over – and as he had nothing planned with his friends and his schoolwork was done, he would be able to spend some time by himself.

First, though, he had to go to the grocery store. He needed pasta, potatoes, some vegetables and perhaps some chicken. He would see about that when he got there. He wasn't the kind of person who wrote down on a list each and every thing he needed to buy; instead he kept it in his head. It usually resulted in him forgetting something, but he had lovely neighbours. They had never been able to say no to him.

All of this would have happened, if not for what took place next.

A car speeding down the road didn't notice – or didn't care – that the light ahead switched from green to red. Instead, it flew into the intersection at a high speed, where the crossing lanes' light just turned green.

At the same exact moment, a motorcycle entered the intersection.

The crash could not be avoided.

Harry saw as if in slow motion as the driver of the motorcycle was thrown to the side, landing on the ground with the motorbike on top of him. The driver of the car slammed on the brakes, but couldn't stop the vehicle from running over the man on the ground.

The sound of metal cutting into metal was deafening.

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Harry ran, his legs obeying him before his brain even had time to give the order. Other people were running towards the scene as well, but Harry arrived first. The driver of the car was getting out; it was a young man. Harry didn't care to register more of the person's looks; if he was up and walking, he would be fine. He was far more worried about the lifeless body of the motorbike driver.

Trying to be both fast and gentle, Harry and another person who came running to the scene lifted the motorbike off the man below. Harry heard someone calling for an ambulance.

The man on the ground didn't move. Harry bent down next to him, carefully trying to avoid touching him, while at the same time trying to decipher the man's injuries. He unfastened the helmet and moved it upwards, off the man's head. It wouldn't go all the way off without Harry having to move the man, so he left it there, instead searching for a pulse along the man's neck. When he'd searched for several long seconds and still hadn't found one, he made a quick decision and pulled the helmet off the man completely.

Without pausing to look at the man, he bent down and began giving CPR. The guy who'd helped him lift the bike off the man on the ground helped by doing the chest compressions, whilst Harry blew air into the victim's mouth.

Suddenly, Harry felt a little gasp of breath as the man began breathing on his own again. At the same time, he heard and saw the ambulance arrive on the scene. He looked down at the man whose life he'd just saved.

His mouth fell open and his eyes widened as he saw who the unconscious man on the ground was. Memories assaulted him, memories of a school and a life from the past.

It was Draco Malfoy.

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He would ask himself later why he had asked to come with the ambulance as it rode at high speed towards the hospital. He would never come up with a good answer other than that it had felt right at the time.

He sat in the front of the vehicle, turned towards the back to watch as the paramedics struggled to keep Malfoy alive. He looked a mess; the blond hair that was trademarked to the

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Malfoy family was stained with blood. The medics didn't tell him anything; they didn't have the time. They asked questions, all about Malfoy. His name, his blood type, his medical history, any allergies... Harry couldn't answer more than the first one. He didn't think it would be appropriate to tell the Muggle paramedics that Malfoy had injured himself a few times whilst playing Qui—

He stopped the thought before it became anything more, refusing another assault of the memories he had locked away long ago.

When they arrived at the chaotic Muggle hospital, Harry was once again pushed to the side as Malfoy was wheeled into surgery. A nurse showed him to the waiting area and he sat down. The same nurse told him where the coffee machine was as well and told him that the police would be likely to contact Harry to interview him about the accident. Indeed they did. An hour after he'd arrived at the hospital. Still in a state of mild shock, Harry answered the questions automatically about what had happened and that the other driver had definitely caused the accident. He then gave the police his address and phone number, so that he could be reached if he was needed. Then they bid him a good evening. Harry returned the good bye, before sitting back down, the world around him disappearing as he sank into thought.

Harry headed over to the coffee machine, desperate for something that he recognized, even if it was only a drink.

Four hours ago, he'd been at the university, happy that the week was halfway over; only Thursday and Friday left before the weekend. He'd been looking forward to a calm weekend at home, where he would continue writing his new novel. He'd written about a hundred pages so far, but was still unhappy with its progress. If it didn't get any better in the next fifty pages, he would scrap it completely and start over again. His muses just didn't seem to be with him these days. Unlike when he wrote his first novel—

Again, he stopped those thoughts before they could get any further.

Now he sat here in the waiting area of the hospital, waiting for a word from the doctors or the nurses, on whether Draco Malfoy, his school nemesis, would pull through after such a horrid motorbike accident. He wondered if he would care if he didn't make it. It had been close to five years since the last time Harry had seen the youngest Malfoy. Five years is a lot of time to think, especially when he had done almost nothing but think for the first year after leaving Hogwarts.

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Yet again, he stopped the painful memories of the school he used to love before they could continue to hurt inside. He had worked too hard at setting those feelings aside for them to be brought to the surface so brutally once more. He didn't want to think about—

“Mr. Evans?”

Harry looked up to see a doctor. She was thirty and some, her face kind and tired. Ashen hair hung down her shoulders. She had a petite figure.

“Yes?”

She stretched her hand out. “I am Doctor Salus. I am the doctor who operated on Mr. Malfoy.”

“I'm Harry,” he said. “Harry Evans.” Her eyes widened slightly in recognition before she went back to being completely professional. Harry felt a bit awkward standing there, making formal greetings when the conversation would soon be about another person's life.

“We finished operating on your friend,” she told him and it felt strange to Harry to call Malfoy a friend.

“Is he—”

“He is still alive, yes,” said the doctor. “But I'm afraid that he isn't well at all.” When Harry just looked at her questioningly, she continued, “His left arm was fractured in two places and his leg in four. He has multiple bruising, but managed to avoid any broken ribs. Two of them are cracked though. And— his spinal cord was also injured.”

Harry's brows furrowed. “What?” He knew what it should mean, but he needed to hear it from her to actually believe it.

“Mr. Malfoy's spinal cord was broken,” she said again. “He is most likely paralysed from his waist down.”

Harry stared. He couldn't come up with anything better to do. “He – what?” he asked dumbly.

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“His spinal cord was injured in the accident,” she repeated a third time. “We don’t know just how badly it has affected him yet, or if it will be permanent; we won’t be able to tell until the scans come back. We also have to test him once he’s awake.”

“He’s not awake, then?” Harry asked, his voice sounding faraway in his own head. His mind was reeling – this was not how it was supposed to be. Malfoy was supposed to be fine; he had always been after every single accident and fight they’d gotten into. He wasn’t supposed to be—

“No, he is sleeping. I doubt he will wake up at all today. You should come back tomorrow.” She smiled kindly at him. “I’m sorry it couldn’t be better news.”

Harry shook his head slowly at her, “Don’t – don’t worry about it.” A thought occurred to him. “I – I did CPR on him. Did I—”

“No, Mr. Evans,” Doctor Salus said, “You didn’t cause the injury. His spinal cord was broken on impact, not when you revived him. You didn’t worsen it. In fact,” she said with a very small smile, “I do believe you saved his life.”

*“You saved his life.”*

The words echoed in Harry’s head; he’d heard them before. He didn’t reply to the doctor; he just stood there, perfectly still, the sentence ringing in his ears again and again. The words soon mixed with his previous thoughts – *this is not how it’s supposed to be.*

Doctor Salus’ beeper went off. “Excuse me,” she said, “I have to go. Good night.”

“Good night,” he mumbled back. Then she left and he stood in the waiting room with people milling about around him, feeling utterly alone.

*“You saved his life.”*

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Unable to sleep, Harry was back at the hospital early the next morning. It being in the middle of January, the sun had barely risen by the time Harry reached the Intensive Care Unit at the Muggle hospital to which Malfoy had been taken. He didn’t have an exact reason as to *why* he

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was back there, but some part of him told him that it was time to bury the hatchet between him and Malfoy. It should have been done long ago, but they had never had the chance. At least that was what Harry told himself was the reason, as he made his way up the stairs to the hospital's entrance.

Harry had wondered where Malfoy had been for the last five years. He hadn't even shown up when his parents were sentenced to a lifetime in Azkaban, the Wizarding prison. Of course, Azkaban belonged to the things that Harry refused to think about, so he barred those thoughts before they could get any more involved.

Harry walked up to the counter. "Hi," he said with as much of a smile as he could muster, "I'm looking for Draco Malfoy."

The nurse, who'd been writing in some papers, looked up. "Wait just a moment," she said and turned to the computer. Then she turned back slowly, stared at him and then turned back to the computer once more. "Just a second," she said. This time her words were mumbled and a light blush spread on her cheeks.

Harry continued to smile and nod. He was used to the treatment, although it always made him feel a bit stupid. He was good looking – according to others, at least – and his picture had been in the paper a few times. People liked celebrities.

"He is in room 256," she said after less than a minute, "but our visiting hours aren't really until—"

"I will make it short, I promise," Harry said and fired off another smile.

"Oh," she said, blushing slightly, "All right. It's down the corridor, to your left. But be careful not to disturb him – he's been through a terrible trauma."

"I know and I won't," Harry said and then he left, the nurse still staring after him.

The hallways were filled with equipment and stray beds, but vacant of people. He passed a nurse or two, and a doctor told him good morning, but during the rest of his time walking down the long corridor, he was alone.

248, 250, 252... There was the room he was looking for. It had windows out to the hallway but the curtains were drawn, so Harry couldn't look inside. His heart rate sped up for some inexplicable reason, as he raised his hand to open the door. He wondered what he was

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expecting, but then he pushed the handle down and the door opened soundlessly and he didn't have to wonder anymore.

There, in the middle of a small room with windows on both sides – the one Harry had seen from the corridor and the other one overlooking the street below and the red sky outside – lay Draco Malfoy.

*“You saved his life.”*

The left side of his face was covered with white gauze, the skin beneath looked purplish and unhealthy. Bandages covered various parts of his body and his left arm and leg were in casts. Malfoy's face looked paler than Harry remembered it, but that could just be his fuzzy memory playing with him, or possibly the light of the room. Around Malfoy's body was some sort of structure, connected to the blond in various places. Harry guessed that it was the thing to keep Malfoy from moving around, which would put his spinal cord in an even worse condition.

Malfoy's body was also connected to an arsenal of machines – pulse, blood pressure and many more that Harry didn't recognize. They filled the room with beeping noises that soon faded into the back of Harry's mind, somehow safe in its continuity.

He didn't know how long he stood there, just staring at the figure that had once been his school nemesis. The Draco Malfoy before Harry looked nothing like the tall, proud and to no end irritating, spoiled git that had been a nuisance to Harry for six and a half years.

Of course, that may not be completely true, as Harry had, after all, pestered Malfoy back. So the blame couldn't be put *entirely* on the blond, although he felt it would be fairer. He almost smiled as memories came forth, but then remembered that he didn't want to think about those things, and he swiftly shut the door to that part of his brain.

The blond in question suddenly emitted a small, pained sigh.

A sudden panic seized Harry, but he found that his limbs were no longer responding. Instead of running out of there, which was Harry's first impulse, he stood frozen on the ground as Malfoy woke up before him.

His eyes fluttered open as Harry suddenly reminisced who it was he was dealing with.

Draco Malfoy.

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His nemesis from school, who had hated Hermione for not being a pure-blood and despised Ron for being poor.

Malfoy blinked at him, grey orbs focusing on the world around him. He squinted at Harry, trying to make his eyes function correctly again, his mind confused. Harry could see and read the puzzled expression as clearly as a book, something that was also quite different from the old Malfoy.

“Do I know you?” he asked, looking like he wanted to cock his head slightly to the side, but unable to because of the structure keeping him in place. His voice was raspy, like someone who hadn’t used his voice in a while. He also sounded tired.

Harry smiled and he could feel how forced and unnatural it looked. “Yeah, Malfoy, you do,” he said.

Malfoy’s mouth fell open. “Potter?” His voice held a mixture of wonder and loathing.

Harry shrugged. “Well, Evans these days, but yeah, that would be me.”

“Without the scar and new glasses. Wonderful. What the hell are you doing here?”

Judging by the tone of Malfoy’s voice, he could just as well have been talking about the weather.

“I – um,” Harry said and damned his ineloquence. As long as he was alone with his notebook and a pen, he could ‘do things with words that I have never seen before’ – as Harry’s agent, Ms Pally Devan, had once told him. Faced with a former nemesis from his teen-years, however, he was, obviously, a bumbling idiot.

“Well? Spit it out?”

When Malfoy still wasn’t able to sound harsh, Harry suddenly realised that he was still heavily drugged. He probably wasn’t able to sound nasty at the moment. If someone had told Harry when he was at school that the day would come when Draco Malfoy couldn’t sound nasty, he would have told them to go to St Mu—

Yet again, he forced the thoughts back.

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“You were in an accident,” Harry finally managed to reply. “I was there. I kind of— came with the ambulance— to the hospital.” The last words were mumbled, close to incoherent.

Malfoy’s brow furrowed slightly. “I was riding my motorbike,” he said, the frown deepening. He looked up, though the movement was small, hindered by the structure around him. “So you’ve come to gloat?”

“I – what? No, I haven’t. You were in an accident and I just – I wanted to see that you were okay,” Harry finished off lamely. Truth was, he still hadn’t figured out why he’d come back today.

“You wanted to ‘see that I was okay?’” This time Malfoy managed the harshness, although Harry thought he could hear a trace of tiredness too. “Your enemy. You wanted to see that I was okay. You do understand why I think it’s a bit— hard to believe.”

Harry glared at the blond. “Whatever. I don’t care.”

“Now see, *that* I recognize. You – don’t – care.” Malfoy’s steel gaze met Harry’s. “So now that that’s over with, get out.”

“What?” Harry asked dumbly, the glare disappearing immediately.

“You heard me. You’ve come, you’ve seen that I’m ‘all right’ and now you’re getting the hell away from here.” Malfoy’s eyes were hard, his jaw set. “Leave.”

Harry sighed softly. “Malfoy, I—“

“Out!” Malfoy didn’t manage a real scream, but his voice was definitely louder.

Harry didn’t try again; he turned and left.

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He spent the afternoon wandering around town. He couldn’t bring himself to go to class. He should but he couldn’t possibly sit through tedious classes when his world had just, yet again, been turned upside down. Malfoy’s involuntary return into his life had brought back memories of a life he’d rather just forget all about. He didn’t *want* to remember. He had

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turned his back on the Wizarding world for a reason, a good reason, and to be brought back into it so forcefully—

He pushed the thoughts away, trying to tell himself that he hadn't been brought back, not really. He could still just turn his back on Malfoy, on that life.

Harry walked into his favourite café, Espresso House, and ordered a caffe latte. Realizing that he hadn't eaten all day long – he seemed to have forgotten all about breakfast that morning and his lunch had been an apple – he also bought a scone with butter and cheese. Still with thoughts rumbling around in his head, he paid the girl behind the counter and made his way over to a table by the window. The late afternoon sun was colouring the sky a deep shade of orange but Harry barely noticed.

*“You saved his life.”*

Among all those other thoughts that filled his brain, that sentence stood out clearly. Two voices repeated the same word; one was the doctor, the other was— a voice from the past, a voice he should forget. He didn't want to remember; it only brought back his failure.

So he sat and stared at the sunset until it was dark, when the girl from behind the counter came up to him and told him they were closing for the evening. The skinny girl, eighteen years old or so, waited by his side until he'd put his jacket on.

“Sorry,” Harry mumbled when he noticed that the rest of the café was empty.

“Don't worry about it.” The girl smiled pleasantly at him. She was taking the cup and the plate when she turned to him and asked, “Did you not like the coffee, sir?”

“What?” Harry asked distractedly.

“Your cup is still full,” she said, her tone pleasant. She seemed curious.

“I – I guess I didn't feel like coffee after all.”

She only smiled at him. “Good night, sir,” she said as he pulled open the door to leave.

“Good – good night,” Harry said.

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Morning arrived and Harry went to class. He had already missed a whole day yesterday; he couldn't very well miss another. When his last class finished at three in the afternoon, he thanked whatever deity was in charge of the world for making the day a Friday. His professors had asked him questions several times during the day's classes and he had been able to answer a grand total of none, because his mind had been somewhere completely different.

As much as he tried to force the thoughts away, they just continued to invade his mind. In fact, the more he attempted to push them away, the heavier were the loads of memories that washed over him. Like a tidal wave they only grew stronger and stronger, destroying all the walls that he had so carefully built up around himself.

"Harry!" The shout caused Harry to stop in mid-stride to see who wanted his attention. He turned around and was faced with a young woman with long, dark hair.

"Hey Myra," Harry said, trying to bring enthusiasm to his words. The sight of his friend didn't stop the thought from entering his mind though:

*They all die...*

Myra regarded him, frowning. "You don't seem happy," she said.

"I just – something happened the other day," Harry said. "I just – I don't—"

"You don't want to talk about it?" Myra said, raising an eyebrow.

Harry looked helplessly at her, wondering how she would react if he told her everything about the world he'd once been a part of. The logical part of his brain replied that she would be scared, revolted by the notion of something so—unnatural. The voice came to him; Uncle Vernon's voice, telling him he was a freak. He met Myra's brown eyes. "Sorry," he said, voice a bare whisper. "I just can't."

He started to turn around, but Myra grabbed his sleeve. Being several inches shorter than him, she had to look up at him. She opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again with a thoughtful expression.

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“I’m here,” she said. “If you need me, I’m here.”

He attempted a smile, but had a feeling that he failed miserably at it. “Thanks,” he said and left her staring at him.

That afternoon, Harry sat brooding at home. He didn’t know what to do – he wanted to block out the memories and never have to deal with them again, but everywhere he looked suddenly seemed to be connected to the past in some way, despite his efforts to buy everything anew when he left his past behind him.

Or, rather, he admitted to himself, when he fled from his past. He had never actually left it.

Finally becoming annoyed with himself, he stood and grabbed his coat again. Filled with a sudden urge to do something, he picked up his keys and left the apartment. Almost running down the steps, he left the building in no time. The pavement was, as always, filled with people, since he lived in a busier part of Muggle London. They paid no heed to him as he sped down the road, destination clear in his mind: the hospital, and more precisely, the Intensive Care Unit.

The hospital was buzzing with activity, just as it had been the last time Harry had come there. Nurses and doctors, all clad in the customary greens and whites, and patients on beds, some unconscious and others crying, and finally the relatives and friends, all anxious and tired. Harry fitted into neither group; he was not a member of the medical personnel, he was not a patient – thankfully – and he could consider himself neither friend nor relative of Malfoy’s.

“Uh, hi,” he said to the nurse in the reception. “I’m looking for Draco Malfoy?”

“Relation?” the man asked, clearly stressed.

“Friend,” Harry said despite his earlier thoughts.

“He’s been moved to the third floor, room 317,” the man said. “Visiting hours are until five. Next?”

Harry was pushed aside. He didn’t mind; he made his way down the corridor to the stairs. Arriving on the third floor slightly out of breath, he swore to himself that he would start exercising again. All he ever did nowadays was walk to and from the university.

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He realised how wrong the thoughts were, when he remembered whom he was going to visit and why.

The third floor was much calmer than the first. Harry soon realised that this was the ward for people with long-term illnesses and injuries. The ward was quiet, though not eerily so. It was more like a home-environment, with pictures, paintings and drawings on the walls, a big room with couches, a TV, a stereo, and an assortment of videos and CDs. A man in his forties sitting in his wheelchair was watching the TV with interest, not looking up as Harry walked past him.

These rooms also had windows out to the corridor, although most of the blinds were drawn. Harry understood their need for at least some privacy. He knew there couldn't be much privacy involved when a person needed help to get to and from the bathroom and sometimes even to do the business itself.

Room 317 was towards the end of the corridor. Harry walked past a room where two nurses were sipping tea while discussing something quietly.

Outside of room 317, he stopped and took a deep breath. The blinds were drawn here too; Harry wasn't surprised. Malfoy had always been one to demand his privacy. Harry noticed his hand shaking as he lifted it and knocked on the door. Butterflies were fluttering – no, *elephants* were *stomping* – around nervously in his stomach. He didn't know why he was nervous; this was Malfoy, his school nemesis, really no one he cared about and nothing to be scared of.

A voice in his head reminded him that the last time Harry had seen Malfoy, the latter had screamed at him to get out.

He realised that no one had answered his knock. Deciding to chance it, telling himself that Malfoy couldn't actually do anything to him – nothing worse than screaming anyway – he pushed the handle down and opened the door.

Malfoy was sleeping. Voices were heard in the room, but Harry soon realised that it was the TV showing some stupid reality-series and not someone visiting the blond patient on the bed. Daring to step further into the room, Harry took in Malfoy's appearance. He looked pale, too pale for it to be healthy. The bruises visible on the sides of the gauze on Malfoy's face had lessened just fractionally in colour, but still provided a nasty contrast to his skin. The structure was, unsurprisingly, still in place around Malfoy's head and upper body, to keep him from moving. The covers were drawn up to his waist, his left arm in a cast over his stomach.

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Closing the distance to the bed, Harry stretched out for the TV-remote, so that he could turn the TV off.

Harry suddenly found his wrist trapped in Malfoy's hand and blazing eyes were on him.

"Didn't I tell you to leave me alone?" he said, voice low and deadly.

Harry met his glare squarely. "No, last time, you only told me to get out," he said, knowing that the tone of his voice would drive Malfoy mad.

"Then I'll tell you again, get—"

"Malfoy, stop it," Harry said tiredly. "We're not at – we're not in school anymore, I live in the Muggle world and you are in a Muggle hospital, paralysed from the waist down. My being here should be the least of your problems."

Malfoy opened and closed his mouth several times in rapid succession. Harry enjoyed the moment when he had rendered Malfoy speechless. He realised suddenly that since deciding to come to the hospital to see Malfoy, his thoughts hadn't run rampant like they had before. Afraid to lose the ability to stop the unwanted thoughts from coming, Harry returned his attention to the blond before him. The other man was looking furious once more.

"I don't know how you found out about the extent of my injuries," he said, composure and deadliness won back, "but trust me when I say that I didn't want you to know. Now get out before I call the nurse."

Harry rolled his eyes and pulled his wrist out of Malfoy's grasp. He noted the flash of pain, the small wince, as he did so and reminded himself that he should be careful with the blond. Even if Malfoy didn't want to admit it to himself, he had been gravely injured in the accident. Some part of Harry wondered why he cared; Harry told that part that it didn't matter who it was before him; he was not going to hurt the person further after such an accident.

He turned off the irritating TV. Even with his back turned, he knew Malfoy was watching his every move.

"Does anyone else know that you are here?" he asked finally, turning back to Malfoy.

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Malfoy seemed to be debating with himself whether he should reply or not and when half a minute had passed, Harry exclaimed, “Oh come on, Malfoy! Is it really *that* bad that I’m here? That I know?”

Malfoy’s eyes flashed with anger familiar from years before. “Get out,” he hissed.

“Is that the only thing you can say?” Harry asked, annoyance rising within. “Get out? Haven’t you changed a bit? Are you still that spoiled brat that I knew long ago?”

Malfoy seemed to want to move and his anger only increased when he realised that the structure around him kept him from doing so. The fact that said structure was keeping him alive at the moment didn’t matter; he wanted nothing so bad as to get up and punch Harry; Harry could see it, written clearly on Malfoy’s face.

“Get out!” Malfoy screamed again. “Get out, get out, get out!”

His expression falling, Harry turned and left the room, door falling shut quietly behind him.

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## *Chapter two* *Remembrance*

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Saturday dawned bright and clear. Spring started to show itself, bringing with it baby birds begging their mothers for food, insects returning from whatever it was they did during the winter, and an insane amount of happy people. The sun seemed to go to their heads; everywhere Harry looked, people were smiling, talking, walking down the street with friends in tow. The cafés were filled with people buying take-out to bring to the park where they would sit for hours, continuing to smile, talk and enjoy life.

Spring was also the season of love, or at least that was what the magazines claimed. Perhaps that was why Harry felt completely alone as he walked by himself down the street with grocery bags in hand, watching as couples kissed and cuddled on the benches and pavements.

It had been close to a week and a half since Malfoy's accident. It was a week since Harry had been at the hospital the last time, when Malfoy had screamed at him to 'get out!' yet again. He hadn't gone back since. He told himself it was because it would do no good, especially not to Malfoy, who was in danger of making his injuries even worse if he didn't keep still.

The taunting voice in his head told him another story. It told him he was weak, scared. Harry didn't want to believe it, although deep down, he knew it to be true.

Since he'd been at the hospital, he had managed to block all the unwanted thoughts from his mind. Like when he first left that world, he firmly shut the door and refused to think about it at all. He went on with life as he had since that time; he spent the weekend by the computer, trying to write a few sentences for his new book – an attempt which failed miserably – and during the week he was in class. He buried himself in schoolwork and avoided his friends. Myra watched him from a distance, he knew, trying to figure out what was wrong. She was getting more and more curious – and annoyed, to a point – to what was going on, just as his other friend, Darius Alden.

“You know, you can't just hide from us,” Darius had told him just the day before. “Friends exist for a reason. And that reason is not ‘to shy away from every time you get a problem’. Although you seem to have gotten the definition wrong, I'll admit.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Look, I’m sorry,” Harry said. “I just – it’s complicated and it would take too long to explain. Just leave it alone.” He kicked a stone on the ground.

Darius, a very good-looking – and wealthy – young man with wavy dark hair and a muscular build, regarded him with a raised eyebrow. The look reminded Harry very much of—

“Too complicated?” he said. “Then I’m guessing this has to do with that mysterious past of yours. Am I right?”

Harry shrugged, knowing that it would do him no good to deny this. He had never been a good liar.

Still with the raised eyebrow, Darius said, “And you still don’t think it would be a good idea to tell us?”

Frustrated, Harry said, “No! It’s not – I can’t tell you. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“No. Not now. I – I have to figure it out for myself first,” Harry said, the last part said in a sigh. He looked up to meet Darius eye. “I’ll tell you when I understand it, okay?”

Darius sighed theatrically, throwing his hands up in the air. “Fine,” he said. Then he fired off a brilliant smile. “Now, do you think Myra would be so kind as to lend me her notes? *I really* didn’t have time to write anything last night.”

“And what, pray tell, did you do instead?” Harry asked with a shake of his head, already knowing the answer. He hadn’t known Darius for three years for nothing. Then again, he was thankful for the change of topic. “Or rather, who?”

“A gorgeous little thing called Blossom. What a fitting name at that – she was a beautiful little flower, that one,” Darius grinned at the memory.

“How old was she? And where did you find her?” Harry asked. He wasn’t sure he actually wanted to know, but he still asked. Listening to Darius was sort of like reading about the celebrities’ lives; fun, but not exactly interesting and definitely not something Harry could relate to.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Nineteen,” Darius said. “She’s from Cambridge and is planning on moving here.”

“When did she decide on that?” Harry asked dryly. “Yesterday?”

“No, actually,” Darius said, pretending to be affronted. “She’s here looking for an apartment.”

“Oh, and I’m sure you showed her the very finest parts of London, right? Especially the finest of London beds?”

“Now, now, don’t be like that,” Darius said, glaring playfully at Harry.

“But it’s true,” Harry said. “Is it not?”

Darius grinned widely. “She’s wonderful,” he said happily.

“I’m sure,” said Harry, with another roll of his eyes. Every single one of Darius’ conquests was ‘wonderful’. Harry knew that this girl would be history in a few weeks, at the latest, just as they all were. Darius was not one to go steady with anyone, least of all some pretty blonde (somehow, Harry just *knew* that the girl was blonde) named Blossom. “We have to go,” Harry said. “Class is starting.”

Darius rolled his eyes. “Fine, I’m coming,” he said. “You know, you never told me whether you think Myra will let me have her notes or not...”

Now it was Saturday and Harry unlocked his apartment and walked inside, arms full of groceries. His apartment was a mess: he hadn’t bothered to clean up in the last week. His mind had been elsewhere, far elsewhere. He stole a glance at the clock – a Muggle clock, of course – and before he had time to block it, the thought came unbidden to his mind:

*Visiting hours are until five.*

He shook his head to clear it, not wanting to think about it, about him. Malfoy spelled trouble in big, bold letters. Harry shouldn’t go visit him again, because somehow he knew that if he went one more time, he would not be able to turn his back on the other man again.

As if you could turn your back on him before, taunted the voice in his head and Harry swore under his breath. He had gone back to the hospital twice already. There had been absolutely no need for him to do so, especially not the first time, but he had. He was a ‘good guy’, the

## *The Depths of Winter*

'hero'. Thus he needed to know that the person he'd saved was doing all right, even if said person was his – former? – enemy. Harry couldn't very well say that the angry young man on the hospital bed was the same boy he had faced off with in school and that was said to have—

He stopped the train of thought abruptly. Things had happened; things through which no person could live and come out unscratched from.

Before he knew it, he was outside again, walking down the street towards the hospital.

\*

The ward was slightly more alive this time when Harry entered it. In the big room with the couches sat a woman in a wheelchair, with a child on her lap and a man whom Harry assumed was her husband, beside her. Several of the rooms had the blinds open this time around and Harry saw smiling families and friends surrounding the patients on the beds. He knew his own visit to Malfoy wouldn't be anywhere near that.

He knocked, this time without his hand shaking. He didn't know what he was expecting from this visit, but he knew that it would be the 'third time's the charm'. If that was charmed only to be hexed to hell, or charmed to a slightly less cold Malfoy, he didn't know, although he could probably guess.

He heard, "Come in," said from the other side of the door and he opened it.

"Hello Malfoy," he said.

The structure around Malfoy's upper body didn't allow him to turn at all, so he couldn't see Harry when he entered, but Harry knew that Malfoy would recognize him even if he were blindfolded and had nothing to go on but his hearing.

"Potter," he said, managing to make it sound like a cuss word. "You are back."

"Your powers of observation astound me," Harry said, moving into the room, into Malfoy's view.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“As your powers of ignorance astound me,” Malfoy said, his glare now following Harry’s every movement. “Why are you here?”

Harry, who had been looking out the window in pretence to ignore Malfoy, turned to face the bed. “Why, I’m here to see you of course,” he said and he was unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. He studied the floor briefly before he looked up at Malfoy again. “Honestly? I don’t know.”

“Now there’s an eloquent answer if I ever heard one.” Malfoy’s voice was colder than ice. “Don’t make me repeat myself again.”

“Oh, you mean the shouts of ‘get out, get out?’” Harry mimicked Malfoy’s words in a high-pitched girly voice. “No, I don’t want to hear that again. Ever.”

“Why – are – you – here?” Malfoy said slowly, as though talking to a four year-old.

Harry returned the glare Malfoy was giving him, suddenly serious. “I told you, Malfoy. I don’t know. The only thing I *do* know is that since your accident, I have been bombarded with memories – memories I thought I did a good job on locking away. I want – I don’t know – I want them to *stop*.”

“And how, would you say, does coming here, visiting me three times in less than two weeks, help you stop your stupid memories from assaulting you? And why, for heavens sakes *would I care?*” His tone was biting, cold as ice.

Frustrated, Harry ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know!” he said again. “I just – I don’t—“

”If you say that you don’t know one more time, I am going to—“

“To do what?” Harry spat, irritated. “Hex me without a wand? Get up and punch me without working legs? Call on your imprisoned father to do the dirty work?”

As soon as the words left Harry’s mouth, he regretted them, but there was no way to take them back. Even with their history, what he had just said was far below the belt: all of it.

What little colour was left on Malfoy’s pale cheeks disappeared and he looked down on the covers pulled up over his waist. He mumbled something that Harry didn’t catch.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“I – I’m sorry,” Harry stammered. “I shouldn’t have – I’m sorry—“

Malfoy looked up again, chest heaving in aggravation and his eyes once again alive with fury. “Fuck you, Potter. *Fuck – you.*”

This time, Malfoy didn’t have to scream at Harry to leave; he did so of his own accord.

\*

He couldn’t recall how he got there, but suddenly he was back at the café. He stood in line, his mind blank and when he reached the counter, he still had no idea what he was to get. The girl he had met the last time he was there was there again today though, and she gave him a latte and a scone with cheese and butter, just like last time. She gave him a small smile and took the money from his hand before he could start trying to count it, giving him back the correct amount of change and calling on the next person in line.

Harry knew she must have thought he was strange, but he couldn’t bring himself to care at the moment. Instead he sat down at the same table he’d sat at the last time and watched the people milling about outside. Smiling faces, happy people. Harry wondered if he’d ever been one of them. He didn’t think so.

Hours must have passed, because when Harry stirred out of his empty thoughts the next time, the café was nearly empty; only a few booths were still occupied and all but Harry seemed to be there in couples.

“Back again, huh?”

The voice made him jump in surprise. The girl from behind the counter stood just behind him.

“Um, yeah,” Harry said. “I’m here pretty often. You’re new?”

She nodded, a strand of dark hair falling in her face. She brushed it away. “Started about two weeks ago,” she said.

“Is it any fun?” Harry told himself that he should at least try to sound interested, as she was clearly interested in him.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“It’s okay.” She shrugged. “Pretty nice folks to work with and I get to meet a lot of people when I’m behind the counter. But the pay sucks.”

He attempted a smile. “I’ll bet.”

“You don’t know anything about that though, do you?” the girl asked looking at him. “Harry Evans, right? I’ve read your books.”

“Oh,” was all Harry could say. “Did you – did you like them?”

Her smile grew. “I loved them. The way you always build up tension more and more throughout the books – it’s brilliant! I can’t wait for your next one.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “Thanks,” he said, then stood up and looked at his watch, pretending to be shocked by the time. “You know, I’m sorry, but I have to go. I – I didn’t realise so much time had passed.”

The smile faltered slightly, but then she brightened. “That’s okay. I’ll see you next time you come here. I’m Mona, by the way.”

She stretched her hand out and he shook it, still unsure of the girl before him. “Nice to meet you, Mona,” he said nonetheless. He had manners, after all, and it seemed to make her happy to be recognized like that. “Bye.”

“Bye,” she said as he left the café.

On the horizon, the clouds were piling up on top of each other. Rain was coming.

\*

Monday morning, Harry awoke at six thirty when his alarm went off. Shutting it off, he rolled over and fell promptly asleep again, only to wake up an hour and a half later and realise that his first class would start in approximately four minutes. Swearing to himself, he jumped out of the bed and tried to pull his socks on whilst getting some cereal out for breakfast. The only result was that he tipped the bowl and suddenly his socks were rained with cereal. Sighing, he sat heavily on the chair and just knew that this would be one of *those* days.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Instead of hurrying off to his class, he pulled the socks off, cleaned the floor from cereal and took some bread out to make toast. He would skip the first lesson; there was no use in coming an hour late anyway.

*“So you have decided to grace our class with your presence, Mr. Potter. How thoughtful of you.”*

His head snapped up as he heard the voice, clear as though Snape was standing right next to him. He knew he was being silly – Snape couldn’t possibly be there and the logical part of Harry’s brain knew this. Still, he couldn’t help but look around the apartment for those long black robes and greasy hair. When he had finally convinced himself that it was just his imagination playing with him, he sat down heavily, his breathing ragged as though he had just run up the stairs.

When he finally did get to class, it was only to realise that he might as well have stayed home. He made a fool out of himself again and again when the professors directed their questions at him and when Myra and Harry met up in the library to study, Harry didn’t take any notes. Instead, his notepad was filled with strange patterns.

Myra snatched the notepad away from him as they left the library. She frowned when her suspicions as to how little attention Harry had paid were confirmed.

“Harry, what’s wrong?” she asked, guiding him outside to sit on one of the benches. “You haven’t paid any attention while we were in the library – I dread to think how you’ve managed in your classes.”

Harry closed his eyes and suddenly, he wasn’t at the university anymore. It was no longer Myra sitting next to him – it was Hermione.

*“Harry, talk to us, please. We can help you.”*

His eyes snapped open again and he was thankful to take in the university’s grounds once more. Myra looked at him worriedly, brown eyes filled with concern. She reminded him of Hermione in more ways than one.

“Myra, I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you,” he heard himself reply. It sounded so far off, like he no longer inhabited his own body.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Harry, you are walking around like a zombie,” said Myra exasperated. “Darius can’t get you to talk; I can’t get you to talk. You should be glad that Candy is in France at the moment, or she’d be here forcing tea down your throat to get you to tell her.”

He managed a small smile at this; Candy would not back off until she knew what was wrong, that much was for certain. She was as sweet as her name suggested, but when something was the matter with one of her friends, she was vicious in her hunt for the problem.

“How long is she going to be gone?” he asked.

“Oh no,” Myra said, eyes narrowing at him. “You are not changing the subject and getting out of this that easily.”

Harry muttered, “Damn,” under his breath and she sent him a reprimanding look.

“Now, talk,” she said.

Harry frowned, thought about it and then shook his head. “No.”

“Harry!” She was getting frustrated with him and perhaps that was what Harry’s subconscious wanted. If she was irritated, she would give up and leave him alone and he could go back into the wonderful land of Denial. “I’m not going to stop bugging you about this until you tell me.”

Harry stood from the bench and glared down at her. “Then I guess you are going to bug me for a very long time,” he said coldly.

He stalked away from her, refusing to look back and see the heartbroken expression he knew would be on her face. If he did look back, his step would falter; he would break and he would tell her. And if he told her, the hurt would only increase more and more until it threatened to overtake him completely—

*“Harry, you can’t carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. Let us help. Come on, mate.”*

He looked up around him, wondering where Ron was hiding. His voice lingered in the air, floating on the gentle spring breeze, reminding him of things he didn’t want reminders of.

*“Let us help... Come on, mate...”*

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Stop it!” he screamed, hands going over his ears, shoulders shaking with held-back sobs. “Stop it, stop it, stop it!”

Then he began running; at first it was jogging but it soon turned into a full-fledged run. His eyes were blind to his surroundings and it was amazing that he managed to avoid causing a horrible accident as he sped down the streets. He knew where he was going although he didn’t know why. It didn’t matter, though. He was going to the only place where the voices stopped, if only briefly. He was going to the source of this madness, the reason why he was remembering in the first place.

The hospital looked cold and indifferent when he stopped, hands on his knees to catch his breath. He refused to stay still for long, however; he was afraid the voices would start again if he had time to think about anything except trying to get a proper amount of air into his lungs. Thus, he pulled open the doors and walked inside.

He walked down the corridor, up the stairs, his feet growing heavier with every step as he realised that he had absolutely no right to come here anymore. The only thing he did was upset Malfoy and although that shouldn’t have mattered to him, it did.

The nurses glared at him but didn’t say anything as he walked down the corridor. He assumed that they had heard his rows with Malfoy the other times he’d been here. They didn’t stop him though, so he ignored them. The ward was calmer now that it was once again a workday and the blinds were, once more, pulled closed. Malfoy’s blinds had been closed every time he came, so that didn’t surprise him.

He knocked, waited for the invitation and then walked inside.

Malfoy turned his head the half centimetre that the structure would allow, but Harry knew that he wouldn’t have needed to do even so much; Malfoy knew that it was—

“Potter.”

“Malfoy.”

“Do you not understand that I do not want you here?” Malfoy asked. He looked tired, dark circles beneath his eyes and a fine sheen of sweat covering his forehead, but Harry didn’t dare to ask about his health. “I thought that after last time even you would have gotten the message.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Look, Malfoy, I didn’t come here to fight—“

“Then why the hell did you come here?” Malfoy interrupted. “I – don’t – want – you – here. Is that concept so hard for the Glorious Potter to grasp?”

Harry felt the anger rise within himself. Anger both at himself for coming here again and at Malfoy for being such a complete prat. He fought to keep himself from saying the things he shouldn’t.

“Well, well, Glorious Potter has finally understood the concept of shutting up,” Malfoy taunted. “Not a day too soon at that.”

“Just like you still haven’t,” Harry spat at him. “You know, how long are we—“

He was interrupted by the door opening. A short, plump nurse entered the room. “Good evening, sir,” she said to him.

“Good afternoon,” he said pleasantly, ignoring the looks of ice that Malfoy gave him.

“It is time for Mr. Malfoy to get cleaned up, so if you could just step outside?” She motioned vaguely toward the door.

Harry’s eyes travelled from the nurse to Malfoy on the bed. Malfoy was glaring at him, but Harry thought he could detect a blush creeping onto his cheeks at the mention of someone else “cleaning him up”. Harry opened his mouth to say something, but changed his mind, took pity on Malfoy and ended up saying only, “Yes, of course,” to the nurse.

He shot a last look at Malfoy on the bed. As he walked to the door, he could feel the cold silver eyes trying to follow his movements.

The door fell shut behind him and he walked down the length of the corridor slowly, his mind still full of thoughts and memories. Ron’s ghostly voice had left him, though, and for that he was thankful. Although Malfoy did nothing but infuriate him, it also seemed to stop the memories from assaulting him in such a harsh way as they did when he was at the university, or even worse, at home.

Walking back up again, he passed Malfoy’s room. The door was still closed and he figured it would take more than just a few minutes to clean a person with injuries that bad up. Thus he continued down towards the common area, where the TV was turned on and two patients

## *The Depths of Winter*

were watching. The young woman looked about Harry's age; she had tubes connected to her arms and her hair was very thin, making Harry wonder if she getting a treatment for cancer. She was in a wheelchair, just like the man next to her. He looked older, his right leg and right arm in casts, as well as a bandage around his head. They were watching the news.

Harry sat down by the window, away from the other two. The couch was comfortable and he looked around for something to pass the time with. He didn't question himself as to why he was staying at the hospital at all when Malfoy so clearly didn't want him to.

His fingers found folders, lying on the table next to the couch he was sitting on. Several were on cancer, on medicine over all, but there was one about being paralysed. Curious, he picked the pamphlet up.

*'What is the central nervous system and why can't it repair itself after an injury?'* it said.

*'The central nervous system (CNS) controls most functions of the body and mind. It consists of two parts: the brain and the spinal cord.'*

*'The spinal cord is the highway for communication between the body and the brain. When the spinal cord is injured, the exchange of information between the brain and other parts of the body is disrupted.'*

*'Many organs and tissues in the body can recover after injury without intervention. Unfortunately, some cells of the central nervous system are so specialized that they cannot divide and create new cells. As a result, recovery from a brain or spinal cord injury is much more difficult.'*

*'The complexity of the central nervous system makes the formation of the right connections between brain and spinal cord cells very difficult.'*

Harry hadn't actually asked about anything to do with Malfoy's injury at the time when it had happened. For the weeks that had passed since then, he had been too busy with his own mind and memories that he had forgotten that Malfoy had been severely injured in the accident that had brought them together. But the fact was that he had, and the injuries he had sustained had been so serious that they would render him in a wheelchair, maybe for the rest of his life.

Suddenly the reality of it all came crashing down on Harry.

Malfoy was *handicapped*.

## *The Depths of Winter*

He *couldn't* move his legs.

He wouldn't be able to lead the life he had always said he would – he would have to have people help him, do things for him, and although he'd had servants since he was born, Malfoy probably loved that because he could order them around, not because he *needed* them.

Standing up suddenly, he wasn't even aware that the two patients had moved their attention from the TV to him instead. He was almost on his way to go back to Malfoy's room when he remembered that the nurse was still there; no more than fifteen minutes had passed. Thus he sank back down into the couch and picked the folder off the floor, where it had fallen to when he'd stood up.

How petty and small those fights they'd had since they were eleven suddenly seemed. In fact, how petty and small a lot of things seemed when he imagined himself in Malfoy's situation. To not be able to walk – he couldn't even begin to grasp the idea.

He read on.

*'Perceptions about the human spinal cord have undergone a revolution in recent years. What was once considered immutable is now showing signs of promise. Because of this, you must no longer accept that you will be paralysed for the rest of your life.'*

Well, that sounded positive at least. There was a chance that Malfoy would be able to get out of that wheelchair. He flicked through the folder and realised that if Malfoy was ever going to be able to walk again, it would take both luck, as far as how bad his injury had been, as well as a great deal of hard work.

“Sir?”

Harry was awakened from his thoughts by the plump nurse. She stood in front of him, slightly concerned but her face was mostly blank as she watched him.

“Yes?” Harry finally said.

“Mr. Malfoy is all done, so you can go back in if you want to,” she said.

Harry cocked his head to the side. “Did he want me to come back?” he asked.

## *The Depths of Winter*

She shook her head. “No, he didn’t say anything. He is a very quiet patient. Except – well, except when you are here.” She looked disapproving at this and Harry had the grace to look sheepish.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” he said. He was just about to head over to Malfoy’s room again, when he stopped and turned back to the nurse. “How bad was his injury?” he asked and now, unlike the first time he’d talked to that doctor, he was interested (and not in a state of shock). “Will he ever be able to walk again?”

“We don’t know. Mr. Malfoy doesn’t seem very keen on working to get better at the moment, but that might change when he can start training for real,” she said. At his questioning look, she continued, “Mr. Malfoy has to stay completely still for two whole months – six more weeks – so that the fracture on his spinal cord doesn’t worsen. After that, we can start him in a training program.”

“Oh,” was all Harry could say. “How long will he have to be in the hospital, then?”

“Six more weeks, of course, and then probably another two before he has learnt how to use the wheelchair and is strong enough to move around again.” She looked up at him. “Are you a relative of his?”

“Me? No,” Harry said. “I’m an— old friend from school.”

The nurse eyed him suspiciously, but nodded. “Do you know where his parents are? We can’t seem to get a hold of them, or even find them in our records.”

*“You’ve lost me my servant, boy!”*

Harry’s head whipped around at the sound of Mr. Malfoy’s voice, so clear as though he’d been standing right there, next to him at the ward.

“Sir? Are you all right?”

Slowly, Harry was returned to reality by the concerned voice of the nurse. “I’m – I’m fine,” he mumbled. “I just – thought I heard something.”

The suspiciousness was back in her eyes, but again, she didn’t say anything.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“I’m just going to—you know, go in—to Malfoy,” Harry said and he fled from the nurse before she could ask another question.

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“You’re back.”

Harry bit back the retort that came so easily to him, gripping the folder in his hand tighter. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Malfoy stared at him unbelievably. “What the bloody hell are you sorry for, Potter?”

Harry frowned; this was not how it was supposed to go. Of course, nothing ever went according to plan when Malfoy was involved, did it?

*Midnight duels, Potions classes, detention with Hagrid...*

Like the others, these thoughts came unbidden into his mind.

“Potter, you’re standing in my room, blocking my sight of the television – the least you could do is answer me.” Again, Malfoy’s voice was cold and impersonal. He sounded like the Malfoy Harry had always known, making Harry wonder if some things ever changed at all.

“How do you know what a telly is anyway?” Harry asked, deciding to try to change the subject.

“Oh for Merlin’s sakes, I did take Muggle Studies, didn’t I?” he spat.

Harry was surprised to hear this. He had never bothered to find out what Malfoy was studying in school, except for the subjects that Harry had to have with him.

“Now you’re going to tell me why the hell you just keep coming back and coming back, again and again, like a bloody yoyo, Potter. You are going to tell me and then you are going to leave and then you’re *not* going to come back after that.”

“Why is it so bad to have me here?” Harry asked. “Do I remind you of something bad? Am I really that horrible to have here? Is it just that it’s *me*?”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“You may take any of those – you just gave three fine points as to why I wouldn’t want you here,” Malfoy said.

“What is it that I remind you of?”

“The same things that I remind you of,” Malfoy said, somehow managing to keep his voice void of feelings. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Harry. “The same things that you don’t want to talk about.”

Harry knew it was a way to get him to stop talking about it – and it was certainly a very effective way. As much as he wanted, he couldn’t force Malfoy any further without having to admit certain things himself – and those were things he wasn’t about to admit to anyone, least of all his nemesis from a school long forgotten.

Malfoy’s eyebrow rose in a face of victory. “See what I mean, Potter? You don’t want to talk about it. And since you don’t, you don’t have to come back here. Which, in turn would make me happy.”

Harry couldn’t hold back a snort. “You? Happy? That will be the day.”

Malfoy’s face fell for a second, but then he regained his composure and the mask of indifference – Harry suddenly realised that it was just that; a mask – was back up again. What he had said had touched a nerve, somewhere deep down inside, beyond the cold shell that was Draco Malfoy.

He gave a soft, small sigh. “I guess this is where you tell me to get out?”

Malfoy’s icy glare was enough to tell him that he should leave and his rational mind was telling him the same.

“All right,” Harry said. “I’ll go. But you know I’ll be back, because there is way too much behind all this – we can’t just leave it alone.”

Malfoy’s eyebrow rose again, this time as in a dare to say, ‘Oh, yeah?’

“Good night, Malfoy,” Harry said and he left the room, for the first time shutting the door quietly behind him instead of slamming it.

## *The Depths of Winter*

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Walking back from the hospital, Harry passed by Espresso House and decided to get a coffee. The coffee shop was busy with people, most of them sitting paired off in the booths and by the windows. A group of loud, young girls sat on the long row of couches, with books before them. Harry guessed they were there to study, although it looked like they were doing nothing of the sort. An assortment of cookies lay on the table, half-eaten, and several mugs of what had probably been hot chocolate were still there.

Harry ordered his own cup – a large latte. He decided to try adding chocolate to it and ended up with a mocha. With it, he decided on a bagel with chicken and bacon, because he hadn't eaten anything in hours and cookies would not do the trick for his growling stomach now.

He picked up a book from his bag – since he hadn't been home since university, he was still carrying the books for his last class.

*“And the Goblin Rebellion...”*

This time, it was Professor Binns' droning voice that entered Harry's mind and made him sit up straight and glance around suspiciously for the ghost. Binns was, of course, nowhere to be seen.

Harry wasn't as shocked, terrified, worried, whatever the word to use, to hear Professor Binns' voice, however. It was not nearly as frightening as having to listen to Ron's voice, whispering in the wind, as though he was still there and not long gone.

As though he wasn't dead.

As though he hadn't been dead for five years.

Harry gripped the cup before him hard as memories of his best friend assaulted his senses, despite how hard he tried to stop them. His eyes were squeezed shut, his body shaking, as he took deep, steady breaths to get his body under control again.

“Mr. Evans? Are you all right?”

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Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he heard Mona's voice. But although she wasn't as much of a distraction as he needed, she was still *a* distraction from the memories.

"I'm fine, Mona," he said, trying to sound like he normally did. "Just—a headache, you know."

She smiled a friendly, sweet smile and nodded. "We have pills to help that, but we're not allowed to give them out to customers," she said. "Sorry," she added, her smile turning sheepish, "some customer reported us to the police for giving pain relievers out, for some reason."

"That's all right," Harry said. "I'm just going to go home and go to bed, I think. I'm sure sleep is all I need."

"Oh, okay then," she said, her smile faltering. "It was nice seeing you again."

"You too," Harry said, trying not to feel bad about leaving so soon. Now that he'd said it though, he only wanted to go home. "I'll see you later."

He left. She smiled.

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## *Chapter three*

### *Silence*

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Another week passed. Harry managed to push the memories of the past back to where he pretended they belonged and alienated his friends even further at the same time. Myra was worried about him and nagged him every time she had the chance. Darius was not as obvious – Harry wondered if he'd realised that something was wrong by himself at all, or if it was Myra who had informed him. Considering how bad Darius tended to be with feelings, he thought that it was probably the latter.

Pushing the memories back included ignoring Malfoy and his 'situation'. Harry didn't want to think about any of that, especially not during the day when he had class. At night however, it was different. That was when Harry brought out the books that he had borrowed from the school library and read about paralysis – what it was, how it could be treated, what it was like to live with it; anything at all. He didn't know why – although he could always blame it on his thirst for learning, which had become more apparent since he'd acted as a teacher during fifth year. Since then, he had realised that knowledge was power – which was what he had needed to defeat—

He shut the thought down before it reached its end, although he knew very well where it would end. These were his memories after all, his history: It was where the thoughts of Malfoy almost always ended – with the school, with their past, with death and destruction.

*They all die.*

*"You saved his life."*

He did manage to read up on paralysis, though, on rehabilitation, on activities for people in wheelchairs and on programs to make the person better. Apparently, water was a great way for a paralysed person to train. His book said,

*The effects of gravity are greatly reduced in water so that small body movements can be more easily detected and therapists can determine a person's maximum ability to*

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*move without the full resistance of gravity. Also, when people are beginning to recover movement, water makes practice easier.'*

He also read about the injury itself – how the spinal cord can be injured, why it doesn't heal itself and what the difference between a complete and an incomplete injury is.

*'Persons with an incomplete injury have some spared sensory or motor function below the level of injury – the spinal cord was not totally damaged or disrupted. In a complete injury, nerve damage obstructs every signal coming from the brain to the body parts below the injury.'*

He would have to remember to ask a nurse or doctor at the hospital what Malfoy's injury was. For Malfoy's sake, he hoped it to be an incomplete one.

Harry couldn't give a proper answer to why he was reading all the pages of text, though. The 'thirst for information' only got him so far. There was some sort of interest in it, in Malfoy, beyond the pure understanding of his injury. As much as Harry hated to admit it, there was a *worry* about Malfoy. Harry knew Malfoy took great pride in his appearance and he was certain that a wheelchair did not fit into that picture. Only now it had to.

The nurse at the hospital had told him that Malfoy had shown little interest in the exercises to make him better, which made Harry wonder – why? Why wouldn't Malfoy want to get better? Did he *want* to spend the rest of his life confined to a wheelchair if he might not have to?

The voice in the back of his head, which usually offered him stupid comments on various subjects, said, 'Perhaps he has already given up.'

Harry refused to believe that, though. He couldn't imagine Draco Malfoy giving up just like that. It wasn't in his character to give up and leave his fate in other people's hands. The Malfoy Harry had known in school was a stuck up brat who never gave up, no matter what he was doing. Harry allowed his thoughts to go a bit further into his history as he recalled the Headmaster calling out the Head Boy and Head Girl of seventh year – Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy.

Hermione...

Harry wondered where she was now. They had all thought she'd end up becoming a Mistress in something – Transfiguration, Potions, or any other subject she wished to go into. After the war, however, she had ended up becoming an apprentice Healer at the Wizard hospital, St

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Mungo's. It had surprised people because it hadn't been something she'd been very interested in before the war. Then again, the war had changed everyone, one way or another.

Harry had lost touch with Hermione only a month after she'd started her apprenticeship, when he had left the Wizarding world for what he had believed to be forever. Apparently, the fates didn't agree with him.

He let out a small sigh. Just then, there was a knock on the door and Harry got up. He wandered over to it and looked out through the small peephole. Darius stood on the other side.

"Hey," Harry said, voice tired, as he opened the door.

"Harry, you look like hell," said Darius with a frown.

"Thanks."

Darius made his way into the apartment without an invitation. For a boy brought up by a high upper-class family, Darius had very little manners. Harry was used to it, though, after knowing him for several years.

Plopping down on the couch, Harry was glad that he'd kept the books on paralysis in his bedroom where Darius wouldn't be able to find and question them. Instead, Darius just turned the telly on and flipped through the channels with the speed of an experienced TV-watcher. Darius liked keeping up with the different soaps – it made it easier to talk to girls, since they then had something to discuss. Who was the biggest loser in 'Big Brother'? Who would win 'Temptation Island'? And were those scandal rumours about drugs and alcohol on the set of 'Survivor' really true? The girls Darius slept with were the kind of girls who watched those shows so Darius did too.

"So, mate, what's up?" Darius asked after flipping through the twenty channels Harry had access to and finding a soap playing. "Myra tells me there's something wrong that she can't get you to talk about. Same thing as before?"

Harry didn't know how to answer, so Darius did it for him, continuing almost immediately. "It has to do with your mysterious past. And what with the way you're acting, I'm going to assume that your past is quite different from mine."

That was the understatement of the year.

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“Something juicy, then,” Darius said, looking at Harry’s dubious face. “Since Candy’s a lesbian, you’re of course bi, and everybody knows about my little indiscretions with chemical drugs—it would have to be absolutely *awful* for you to not talk about it. So what is it? Murder? Mayhem?”

Harry was looking down at his hands. They shook as Darius ranted on, having no idea how close to the truth he was getting.

“I just— Leave it alone, won’t you? I don’t want to talk about it,” Harry said, trying hard to keep the feelings inside of him from bubbling over. He was only seconds from spilling the whole story to Darius; he just knew it. He had to get the other man to leave, unless he wanted to break down for real in front of Darius. He really didn’t want to do that; not now, preferably not ever.

Darius watched Harry; he could see the struggle to keep his emotions at bay, all visible on Harry’s face. Just like Harry had never been good at lying, he had never been able to hide his feelings well.

Darius threw his hands up in the air. “Fine,” he said. There was no malice in his voice when he continued, only slight amusement and a lot more seriousness. “Just don’t be surprised when Myra starts bugging you about it first thing tomorrow morning. She’s going to do that until you tell.”

“I know,” Harry said, frustrated. “I really wish she wouldn’t.”

“It’s the way she is,” Darius sighed dramatically. “Do you have anything to eat?”

Harry rolled his eyes but was thankful for the change of subject. He stood and walked to the small kitchen, where he opened the fridge. Despite his bachelor-status, Harry’s fridge was well filled; there were potatoes, fruits and vegetables, cheese, butter, bottled water and Coke, milk and yogurt. The rest of his kitchen followed the un-bachelor-like theme – there were a dozen plates, glasses, forks, knives, spoons and also a variety of cooking items. Since his time with the Dursleys, he had always liked making food – although it was far more fun to make it for himself, or for people that enjoyed his culinary skills, rather than the ungrateful Dursleys.

“What would you like?” Harry asked Darius.

“Um, you have a sandwich or something?” Darius said from his spot on the couch.

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“What do you want on it?”

“Cheese, ham, cucumber and tomatoes with a little bit of butter on the bottom of it all, please. If you have some pepper, that would be great too. No onions, though.”

Harry’s head appeared in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. “A thought just occurred to me,” he said to Darius. “You can just go ahead and make that sandwich for yourself, since you do know where everything is. That way you’ll get it *just* like you want it.”

Darius made a face at Harry, as if to say, ‘Me? Doing work? Are you kidding?’ In the end, he did make the sandwich for himself.

When they finally sat down on the couch again, Darius handing Harry a sandwich as well – with the line, “I don’t think I’ve seen you eating at all the last three weeks,” which wasn’t entirely true but very close to it – the news was showing on TV. Harry had listened at the beginning, but there was nothing of interest. He recalled his time at the Dursleys, before fifth year, when he lay in the flowerbed trying to hear the news. He was glad to be living on his own now.

Harry sat back and slowly ate the sandwich. When he was had eaten a third, he looked up to see Darius finishing his off.

“You eat like a pig,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“I do not. I just happen to like food,” Darius said, “unlike *some* here.”

Harry ignored him. After he’d finished a bit more of his sandwich, he asked, “Okay, so what do we do now?”

“You stop talking with your mouth full, young man,” Darius said in a perfect imitation of his mother.

Harry raised an eyebrow and said, “*Now* you decide to have some manners?”

“I always have manners,” Darius said, pretending to be affronted. “Are you suggesting that I don’t?”

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Harry's hands – one still grabbing the sandwich – went up in the air. "I ain't sayin' nothin'," he said and let a grin pass over his features. It felt good to smile; it seemed as if it had been a long time since the last time he did it. Now it was a real, honest smile.

"Now there's the Harry Evans we know and love," Darius grinned back.

Harry's heart fell at Darius' use of his taken last name. The seconds of blissful ignorance were gone and he was back in reality. He sighed softly, deciding not to let it show to Darius. He would only worry and tell Myra, who would worry even more.

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Harry managed to get through the next day of classes with the new mask of fake happiness. He paid attention in class, he spoke to his friends – still pointedly ignoring every question Myra had about what had been bugging him, saying that it had been nothing – and he forced food down. His not eating had always been a sign that something was wrong.

When his last class got out at four, Harry had long since decided that he was going to the hospital. It was Tuesday afternoon and it was over a week since he'd been there last. He knew Malfoy would rather have him gone for the rest of eternity, but Harry knew he wouldn't be able to stay away. He had a feeling that Malfoy knew this as well, despite not showing it.

The ward was quiet as always when Harry arrived. No one was watching the telly in the bigger room, but through the blinds of a private room, Harry could see a girl in a wheelchair reading a magazine. The rest of the blinds were pulled shut.

Finally reaching Malfoy's room, Harry was about to knock when he heard voices on the other side. It sounded like a nurse rather than a TV-show this time, so Harry sat down on the chair outside the room instead of knocking. After a minute had passed, Harry picked up a magazine that lay on the low wooden table on his right side. It was one of those magazines about royalties and famous people. On this one, they were writing – yet again – about the Beckhams. Those two, with their children, frequently graced the covers of a variety of magazines. Harry couldn't understand what the big deal was.

Ten minutes later, the room to Malfoy's room opened and the same plump nurse Harry had seen last time came out.

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“Mr. Evans,” she said, still holding the door open with one hand, the other hand grabbing wet towels. “You are here to see Mr. Malfoy?”

“Obviously,” Harry said with a small smile.

She threw a look back inside the room and her features became concerned. “I am sorry to say that Mr. Malfoy is not feeling very well at the moment.”

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked immediately before he could think.

“He came down with a fever over a week ago and it won’t go down. He just doesn’t respond to the medication we’re giving him; the fever keeps rising, little by little.”

Harry’s eyebrows knitted together in a frown. “May I still see him?”

She nodded. “But don’t be long; he needs his rest,” she said.

Harry gave a small nod and walked inside. He heard the door fall shut behind him as the nurse left him and Malfoy alone.

Malfoy lay on the bed, as pale as the first time Harry had seen him at the hospital, his skin glistening with a thin layer of sweat. A bowl sat on the table next to his bed, containing water and on the bowl’s left lay small towels.

“Potter.” Malfoy’s voice sounded raspy and unwell, as he obviously was.

Harry didn’t stop the concern that came to him as he walked forth to the bed where Malfoy could see him. He was not about to play games like the other times when he’d been there, not when Malfoy was sick.

A pearl of sweat made its way from Malfoy’s temple down his cheek. Malfoy’s hand automatically went to wipe it off, but it was stopped short only an inch above the bed by the structure standing around him.

Harry picked up a towel from the bedside table and dabbed it in the water. Slowly, as though he was dealing with a wild animal, he raised the towel to Malfoy’s face and ever so carefully wiped Malfoy’s forehead. Malfoy closed his eyes. Whether it was from humiliation or tiredness, Harry didn’t know, but at least he didn’t tell Harry to stop. Feeling brave, Harry wet the cloth in the cool water again and continued to dab Malfoy’s face and then neck.

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“You shouldn’t be here,” Malfoy said, his voice trying to sound hard and cold and failing miserably since he was heavily drugged and not very coherent.

“I know, I know,” Harry said. “But I did say I would come back, didn’t I?”

“I hate you,” Malfoy said, eyes still closed. Harry had to wonder if he was falling asleep.

“I know that too,” Harry said, a tiny smile touching his lips despite the seriousness of the situation. “Why aren’t you getting better? You’re so heavily drugged you’re even being nice to me.”

Malfoy’s eyes opened slowly. “Probabl— ‘cause my body can’t handle—not used to Muggle medication,” he mumbled and now Harry didn’t have to wonder whether he was falling asleep or not.

Harry frowned. “What? You’re not used to— hey, Malfoy, wake up!” He just barely resisted shaking Malfoy – *that* would really not do any good.

“What?” Malfoy mumbled, eyes closed.

“Malfoy, what do you need to get well again?” Harry asked, voice urgent.

“A ‘ealer, ‘f course...”

The wet towel in Harry’s hand fell to the floor with a ‘thump’.

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## *Chapter four*

### *Hermione*

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There were certain streets, certain areas, which Harry had avoided at all costs for the last four years. One of those areas was the street with the old, red brick department store, Purge and Dowse Ltd., which was also the entrance to St Mungo's. Here, wizards and witches of all ages passed every day at every hour of the day (and night), so when Harry had left the magical world, he had made the decision to never walk there. Myra, Darius and Candy had all looked at him strangely when he'd refused to go down that particular street.

Now he stood before the window with the ugly dummy dressed in the green nylon dress once again, his body shaking with unpleasant feelings. He was nervous, but it was also much more than that. Dread of the memories that were coming, crashing down on him, even as he stood there. Dread of the memories that would come to him as he entered. Dread of the old faces he would see and even more dread for the faces he wouldn't see.

*Fifth year; he stood here with Ron, Ginny and the other Weasleys, all anxious for news of Arthur Weasley.*

Why was he here? He asked himself this question again and again, and he had already turned around eight times, just about to leave when he remembered why he was here.

Malfoy.

Malfoy needed his help.

And if he didn't go into St Mungo's, Malfoy would *die*.

*They all die.*

For the first time, Harry dared to think back at the thought – *They die anyway. People die; it's the way of life.* He didn't dwell on the fact that it was when he'd been thinking of Malfoy that he'd finally managed to get a break in his fight against the voices in his head. If he did think about that, he would stand here for days, just thinking. By then, it would probably be too late,

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considering that Malfoy was now unconscious and, according to the nurses, wouldn't wake up.

Malfoy was going to die and Harry didn't like the thought in the least.

"I'm here to see Hermione Granger," Harry finally said with a clear voice. The strength of his voice surprised him.

The window did its trick and Harry stepped through. Just like the times when he'd arrived to St Mungo's the Muggle way before, the glass felt like water rather than anything solid.

The reception was bustling with people, just like it had been at the Muggle hospital when Malfoy had first been taken there. Somehow, though, the reception at St Mungo's seemed more cheerful. The wards where they held the long term ill patients was as far from the reception as they could be. Harry pulled his cloak – an actual Wizards' cloak, since he wanted to draw as little attention to himself as possible – tighter. It felt strange to be wearing a cloak again; after all, it had been over four years with only Muggle clothes for him. The cloak held memories – it was the one he'd left in – but he pushed them back.

He walked up to the reception where the Welcoming Witch sat, her face annoyed and her cheeks red. "Yes?" she asked as Harry came up.

"I'm—I'm looking for Hermione Granger," Harry said uncertainly, suddenly realizing that Hermione might not be working at St Mungo's at all. She could have moved to another city – or another country – and he wouldn't know. She could—

His thoughts were cut short by the Mediwitch saying, "Healer Granger works on the fourth floor with spell damage. Eighth door to your right is her ward. Next!"

Thankful that he hadn't been recognized, Harry moved swiftly away from the reception and all the people, towards the elevator. There were only two others in the elevator, a mother and her child, and they paid Harry no attention whatsoever; even so, he still found himself wishing for his Invisibility Cloak. It was the one item he had really missed when he left the magical world to lead an all-Muggle life.

The fourth floor was calm and reminded Harry much of the Muggle hospital where he'd spent so many hours in the recent weeks. He counted the doors as he went, reaching the eighth door with the sign, 'Hexes'. He turned the door handle with a shaking hand and walked inside. He found himself in another corridor, with rooms on both sides. Some of the

## *The Depths of Winter*

doors were open, but Harry wasn't paying the least bit of attention to it. He was anxious to find Hermione – and he was anxious to get out of there. Thoughts of Malfoy had more or less left him; at the moment he could only recall that there was a reason for him being there, but what that reason was, he didn't know. He just wanted to get out of there again.

A Healer left a room just up ahead and when he saw Harry, he walked over to him.

“Can I help you, sir?” the Healer asked.

“I'm looking for Healer Granger,” Harry said.

“Oh, all right. A friend of hers?”

Harry nodded uncertainly, not sure that the term ‘friend’ still applied when you hadn't talked in several years. The Healer didn't seem to notice his hesitation though; he led the way down the corridor and turned into a smaller, cosier room at the end of the ward. It had piles of parchment everywhere, some of it with quills writing on them by themselves, and several chairs around a table. Two women, both Healers, Harry assumed, as he guessed that this was their office, sat by the table drinking tea and talking. One was small, with blond hair and clear blue eyes; she sat facing him. The other had familiar brown, bushy hair – and her back to him.

“Granger, this man wants to talk to you,” the Healer who had led Harry there said.

The woman with the familiar brown hair turned around, teacup still in her hand. A second later, the teacup smashed on the floor and tea ran out everywhere. Hermione didn't notice; she only stared at Harry, who in turn smiled sheepishly.

“Hi, 'Mione,” he said quietly.

“Um, Becky, could you— give us a moment?” Hermione asked.

Becky's eyes travelled from Hermione to Harry and back again, before she gave a short nod and left the room. Passing Harry, he noticed just how small she was; she barely reached up to his chest. The door closed behind her and Hermione finally let out a squeal of delight and threw herself onto Harry.

“Harry! Oh my gosh, it's so good to see you!” she said, voice muffled against his chest.

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“It’s, um, nice to see you too, ‘Mione,” Harry said, slightly – all right, very – overwhelmed by the warm welcome. He was waiting for the onslaught of memories that he was expecting, but none were forthcoming. His mind was completely in the here and now.

“How are you?” Hermione asked, pulling Harry to sit down on a chair and then following suit herself. “It’s been so long!”

“Yeah, I know,” Harry said dumbly. He had no idea how he was supposed to act – after all, he was the one who had chosen to leave. It hardly seemed like the right thing for him to say was that if he’d had a choice, he would have continued to stay away.

The little voice in his head reminded him that he had had a choice – he didn’t *have* to do anything about Malfoy’s situation. He had chosen that all by himself. Harry told the voice to shut up.

Meanwhile, Hermione had finally fallen silent and took in Harry’s appearance. She also noticed his silence and his unease. Something was wrong; her common sense told her as much.

“Harry?” she asked, her voice now much quieter than before.

Harry looked up at her, his expression almost confused.

“What did you come here for, Harry?” she asked.

There was a small, sardonic smile. “Malfoy,” he said, as though the one word would explain it all.

“Malfoy?” Hermione echoed, sounding shell shocked for some reason Harry couldn’t fathom. Her eyes were wide as she repeated, “*Draco* Malfoy?”

Harry nodded. “I need your help,” he said. “Well, actually, Malfoy needs your help. That’s why I’m here.”

“Why would you help him?” Hermione asked, sounding almost horrified.

“Because I don’t leave someone who’s paralysed from the waist down to die in a Muggle hospital, no matter what their last name happens to be, not if I can help it,” Harry said. Although he didn’t want to think about it, he knew why Hermione was looking so appalled.

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“Even *him*, Harry?” She spit the word him.

“Even him,” he said with a finality that made her stare and then finally shrug her agreement to him. “Please?”

She thought about it for a few seconds, emotions passing over her face. Harry found that he couldn’t read her as he had been able to back in school; he had no idea what she was thinking. Finally, something that looked almost like a smile graced her lips and she nodded to him.

“I just need to grab a couple of things.”

A few seconds later, she was back, dressed in Muggle clothing, and told him that she was ready to go.

\*

Hermione owned a car.

Of course, seeing how both her parents were Muggles, it wasn’t that hard to understand. She told him that she, besides working at the hospital, was also attending university to learn Muggle science. The little knowledge of Muggle science she already had, had come in handy several times, apparently, in her years as a Healer.

“There are many things that I remembered from my years in Muggle school, before Hogwarts, that have actually come in handy while I’ve been working at St Mungo’s,” she told Harry proudly.

Harry only half listened. He watched Hermione as she steered the vehicle through the busy evening London traffic with familiar ease. She had turned into a woman in the last four and a half years. The last time Harry had seen her, she had still been a teen – a very intelligent and grown-up teen, but still a teen. Now she had let her hair grow to her waist, kept together in a low ponytail. Her face also looked older, more mature than before, her eyes shining with knowledge that could only have come from experience. Harry found himself thinking of Dumbledore, as he watched his former best friend.

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Hermione had fallen silent, but Harry hadn't even noticed. She turned to him for a second and said,

“So, are you going to tell me what is really up with Malfoy?”

Harry shook his head to clear it, when he realised that Hermione had given him a question. “Um,” he said and cursed his ineloquence. “I don't know what's wrong with him,” he said quietly.

“You said he has a fever that won't go down and he isn't reacting to Muggle medicine. But why is he in a Muggle hospital to begin with? Harry?”

“He got into an accident, all right?” Harry snapped, suddenly annoyed. “A motorbike accident. Crashed with a car. Bang.” He slapped his hands together as if to illustrate his point, making Hermione jump. “Ambulance, hospital, lots of doctors. He broke his spinal cord. He's paralysed. I told you that. Broke his leg and arm and a few ribs too, but they're almost fine now I think. Now it's just his spinal cord. And he's gotten sick.”

The car fell very silent and Harry stared out through the side window, ignoring Hermione's concerned eyes. He had never asked to go back to the Wizarding world! He didn't want to be there. He wanted to be in his flat, doing homework for his classes at the university, writing his new book and just ignoring his past, as he had done so well in the last four years. But *no*, the fates *had* to go and screw him over yet again. They *had* to bring Draco Malfoy back into his life and make Harry *care* for some stupid, unknown reason. He didn't want to care, had never asked for this.

Harry brooded the rest of the way – which wasn't any more than five minutes – and when Hermione parked the car in front of the Muggle hospital, he got out without a word.

Hermione followed him up to the third floor without a word. No one paid them any attention, despite it being past visiting hours, until they reached the third floor. There, the same plump nurse that had been there earlier came up to them.

“Visiting hours are over, Mr. Evans,” she said to him. “And besides, Mr. Malfoy is unconscious, so you won't get anything out of a visit anyway.”

“This is Hermione Granger,” Harry said as though the plump nurse hadn't said a word. “She's a specialist and Mr. Malfoy's private doctor. She's here to look at him.” The lie came

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easily for once and although the nurse looked doubtful, she finally sighed and said, “I need to see your papers.”

Luckily, Hermione understood what Harry was doing. She pulled papers from her back with St Mungo’s seal on them, and while the nurse read the papers, Hermione grabbed her wand and muttered a quick spell. Suddenly, the nurse’s doubtful expression changed to a smile.

“Well, everything looks in order, Doctor Granger,” she said. “Come with me, I’ll take you to Mr. Malfoy’s room.”

Malfoy’s room was dark; the only light was that from the streetlights outside, seeping through the closed blinds. Malfoy lay on the bed, the sheet of sweat making his skin glow eerily and his blond hair looked rather like a halo. From a distance, he looked unearthly, but when the trio came closer, even Harry, who had no medical knowledge at all, could see that the blond was sick, very sick.

“He has a dangerously high fever – forty-two point three,” said the nurse, “And he isn’t responding to any of the medication we are giving him. I am afraid that if another day passes with a fever like that, we may never see him wake up again.”

Hermione walked around the bed to Malfoy’s right side and said to the nurse, “Could you please step outside for a few minutes? I need to check a few things.”

“Of course,” said the nurse. Harry wondered if her sudden consent to anything Hermione said had to do with the spell the witch had muttered earlier. Either way, the plump nurse left the room. Harry and Hermione stood on either side of Malfoy.

Hermione muttered two quick spells and suddenly, the casts around Malfoy’s leg and arm disappeared. Both were now healed and fine.

“Take his hand,” Hermione then instructed him. “Be careful, though – I will fix as much as possible with his back in a little while, but right now, I’m going to get his fever down.”

Harry nodded and carefully lifted Malfoy’s hand, lacing the other man’s fingers with his own. Hermione did the same on her side, whilst her other hand held her wand. “*Decreacio*.”

Harry felt energy surge from Malfoy’s hand into his own, up through his arm and into his heart. The energy felt warm; a tickling sensation in his chest.

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“Don’t let go,” Hermione said gravely.

The tickling increased to a hot sensation and then into a burning. Suddenly Harry realised just why Hermione had told him not to let go – had she not told him, he would have done it. The burning turned painful and he could feel his heart beat faster and faster with every passing second. He felt light-headed and gripped the side of the bed tighter to avoid fainting.

Then it suddenly stopped.

“You can let go of his hand now,” Hermione said, disentangling herself, her demeanour cold.

Harry didn’t let go; instead, he asked Hermione, “What did you do?”

“I sent the illness from him into you instead,” Hermione said. “Most of it, at least.”

Harry stared, his mouth gaping. “You did what?”

Hermione smiled slightly. “It’s not as bad as it sounds,” she said. “The bug Malfoy had is a very simple illness. But Malfoy had two problems – a) he is paralysed, so his body wasn’t reacting correctly to the virus and b) the nurses here were feeding him Muggle medicines.”

“Why aren’t Muggle medicines a good thing?” Harry asked.

“Harry, do you recall what Lucius Malfoy looked like?” she asked in turn and Harry nodded. Hermione continued, “He, and Draco here, are both blond, with aristocratic features and are quite beautiful, are they not?”

“Err, sure,” Harry said uncertainly, refusing to say such a word about someone like Malfoy. Although it was accurate.

“Okay, Harry, I’ll make it easy for you. Lucius Malfoy’s mother was a Veela. That makes Lucius himself a half-Veela and Draco a quarter-Veela.”

“But they are always going on about how they are pure bloods!” Harry said.

“Yes, well, being a descendant to Veela isn’t really that bad,” Hermione said. “People think they are beautiful and they have certain magical qualities, so... Besides, people tend to turn a blind eye to anything to do with the Malfoys. Or at least they did before. Either way, Veelas

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can't handle Muggle medicines, just as their bodies can't handle certain potions. Part-Veelas inherit this trait.”

Just then, said Malfoy stirred slightly on the bed. Harry quickly let go of Malfoy's hand, just as his grey eyes fluttered open. Malfoy blinked a couple of times, his eyes getting used to seeing again.

“Potter?” he asked, his voice as thick as it had been when he had last talked, several hours earlier. Eyes wandering, he squinted at Hermione, without recognition.

“How are you feeling?” Hermione asked him without introducing herself.

“Like hell,” Malfoy said. “Who—”

“Oh, you'd know me as ‘Granger’,” Hermione said, her voice icy. “Or perhaps, ‘Mudblood’.”

Malfoy didn't comment on this, nor did he let any recognition or shock show on his face. Instead, he asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Saving you from certain death,” Hermione replied. “Now, let's see what we can do about your back.”

Waving her wand over Malfoy's still form and mumbling a complex spell, a bunch of numbers and letters appeared above him. Harry had absolutely no idea what the letters meant, although he guessed that it was the sort of things Hermione had learned during Arithmancy in school.

Hermione waved her wand again so that all the numbers and letters disappeared.

“I can't do anything about your paralysis,” she said. “If you'd been brought straight to St Mungo's after your accident, we would have been able to heal it quite well, but as it is now, no. I will, however, put a stabilizing spell on your back so that we can take this thing —“ she motioned at the structured around Malfoy “— off. That way, you can go home. You'll still be in a wheelchair and you won't be able to move much, but well, home is better for you since there is nothing the nurses and doctors here can do for you. In fact, they will only make things worse, since they will feed you Muggle medicines.”

Malfoy closed his eyes and said something very quietly.

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“What?” Harry said, opening his mouth for the first time since Malfoy had woken up.

“I don’t have a home,” Malfoy repeated, only a little louder this time.

Harry frowned, but Hermione didn’t seem too surprised, nor did she seem to care much. “Do you have some place else you can live?” she asked him, keeping the same cool, distant voice she’d had since she arrived at the hospital.

“I’ll find something,” Malfoy said, his voice turning cold. “Just perform the bloody spell. I’ll be out of your lives and you won’t have to worry your pretty little heads anymore.”

Hermione’s face turned equally icy, “Fine, then.”

Harry backed away as Hermione said another complex spell that he had never heard of. A blue mist shot out of her wand and surrounded Malfoy. He let out pained but held-back groan. Harry wondered how much the spell hurt; he didn’t think he wanted to know.

The blue mist was absorbed by Malfoy’s body and for a second, his skin glowed blue. Then it disappeared and the room went dark once more.

“There. The spell keeps your back stabilized and secure, so that you can be moved to a wheelchair without risk. You will find that you still can’t turn your head or lift your arms very much, as this would be a risk to your spinal cord,” Hermione explained. “The spell will wear off gradually as your back gets better. In four weeks, it should have worn off completely and then you will be able to move as much as your injury will allow.”

Malfoy gave as much of a nod as the spell would allow but didn’t say anything. Hermione, who hadn’t expected a thank you considering who she was dealing with, waved her wand again and Malfoy’s head tilted back slightly, a scream escaping him. Harry watched Hermione wide-eyed.

“What did you do?” he asked, placing a hand on Malfoy’s shoulder. Malfoy was trembling beneath his touch, sweat glistening on his forehead, his breath still hitched.

“A bowel/bladder controlling spell that we usually use on those that are on temporary bed arrest at St Mungo’s,” Hermione said. “Allows him to feel when he needs to do his business, which he wouldn’t have felt otherwise. Isn’t that so, Malfoy?”

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Malfoy's cheeks turned red and Harry realised that 'cleaning up' wasn't the only thing the nurse had done when she came in the last time he'd been there. Harry felt his cheeks flush.

"Thanks," Malfoy mumbled.

Hermione only raised an eyebrow at him, then turned to Harry.

"I have to go back to St Mungo's," she said. "My shift doesn't end until twelve and I promised I'd be back as soon as I could. The only thing you need to do with him—" she nodded towards Malfoy "—is to take the structure off and find a wheelchair for him. I'm sure he'll be fine after that."

Harry didn't like Hermione's cold tone, but didn't question it.

"Oh," she said, remembering something. She took out two vials from inside her robes. "This," she said giving the first to Harry, "is for you to drink after you've eaten; it will stop Malfoy's virus from infecting you. I don't believe it will anyway, but take it just to be on the safe side. And this," she continued turning around to Malfoy and placing a vial in his lap, "is for you when you get well. One drop, three times per day; it will help your back heal. You will have a bit of a fever for a few days, 'cause I couldn't get all the poison out at once, but you'll be okay."

A flutter of closed eyelids and a murmured, "mhm," was all that told Harry and Hermione that Malfoy had heard a word of what she'd said.

"Don't forget the potion for you tonight, Harry," Hermione said, sending him a stern, mothering look.

"Okay," Harry said, confused as always. He was beginning to wonder if he was supposed to be at least semi-confused at all times. It certainly seemed like it.

Hermione made her way over to the door and was just about to leave when she turned and said, her voice much softer now, "Oh, and Harry? Don't wait four years until you come talk to me again, 'kay?"

She smiled slightly and Harry suddenly remembered just what a great friend she had been for seven years.

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The plump nurse still seemed quite confused when Harry asked her for a wheelchair for Malfoy. She didn't question him though – it seemed whatever spell Hermione had placed on her was a strong one. She had Malfoy sign his own release papers and then she stood and waved good-bye stupidly to them as they took the elevator to the ground floor.

Now they stood – well, Harry stood and Malfoy sat, obviously – outside the hospital, in complete silence.

Finally, after nearly fifteen minutes of silence, Harry had had enough. “Where are you going to go?”

“None of your business, Potter,” Malfoy replied haughtily.

“Fine, fine.” Harry threw his hands up in the air. Muttering, he added, “Jeez, it was just a question.”

“Why are you still here?”

Harry turned to actually look down at Malfoy. It made him feel stupid – with Malfoy sitting down in his wheelchair and Harry towering over him. At the same time, he couldn't very well kneel next to Malfoy. No matter how much said Malfoy would enjoy having Harry kneeling before him, it was a matter of pride – and comfort – for Harry. Sitting hunched wasn't the most comfortable of positions.

Harry realised that he still hadn't answered Malfoy's question. Then again, Harry didn't know the answer to the question, so he might as well stay silent.

“Potter, do not ignore me,” Malfoy said.

“Look, do you want to come and stay at my place tonight? You can leave first thing tomorrow morning, but at the moment, you have no means of getting anywhere. You might have the wheelchair, but you're still unable to move because of the spell, so you can't get anywhere.”

Malfoy glared at him as Harry listed his weaknesses. Harry had a feeling Malfoy hated things that made him seem weak as much now as he had in school.

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Malfoy's silence made Harry grow uncomfortable and he said, "You don't have to, but it's an offer and—"

"Fine," Malfoy spat. "I'll come. But only tonight."

"Of course," Harry said, although he wondered where he would go tomorrow morning. He still wouldn't be able to move until another four weeks had passed.

Harry grabbed the handles on the back of Malfoy's wheelchair and began walking without asking for Malfoy's permission.

The night was cool but the sky was clear and Harry could see the stars above. The streets where they were walking were quiet, with only the stray cat appearing here and there. Harry pushed Malfoy's wheelchair without a word, trying to walk where the road was the flattest. Any little stone they rolled over would make Malfoy's whole body jump, as the spell didn't allow any sudden movements of just one body part.

"Sorry," he muttered, when he, despite his best efforts, pushed the wheelchair over an uneven part of the street.

Malfoy didn't answer. It appeared to Harry as though the blond was sulking.

Harry sighed and continued to push quietly.

They reached the apartment in little less than twenty minutes. Here, they were faced with the first big problem.

"Let me guess," Malfoy said as he looked up the stairs, "you live on the top floor?"

"Actually, no," Harry said, "I live on the third. But that's bad enough."

Malfoy gave out a long-suffering sigh. "And how do you suggest we solve this?"

"You sleep here?" Harry joked, mostly to fill the silence as his brain worked on the problem at hand.

"You know what," Malfoy snapped, "I don't want to be here and you don't want me here. Why don't you just call a cab and I'll leave?"

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“Don’t be stupid,” Harry bit back with almost as much intensity. “You have no place to go and no one to take care of you – yes, you do need taking care of! You can’t eat by yourself, get yourself anywhere, go to the bathroom by yourself or do anything else that is necessary to be able to live alone. So shut up and stop whining the whole time.”

Amazingly, Malfoy did shut up, although his expression stayed very sour.

Harry sighed. “I don’t see any other way for you to get up there than for me to carry you and then get the wheelchair.”

“Hell no,” Malfoy said. “You are not carrying me anywhere like some stupid damsel in distress. Get your wand and do some magic.”

“I haven’t done magic in four and a half years and I’m not about to start now,” Harry said.

“You are wearing a bloody Wizard’s cloak – how hard would it be to do one spell?”

“No. I don’t have my wand.”

“Then go *find* it! You are *not* going to carry me.”

“Do you *want* to sleep out here?” Harry snapped.

Draco looked like he wanted to cross his arms, but the spell didn’t allow him to lift them more than a centimetre off his lap. His expression turned even more annoyed when he realised this.

“Fuck you, Potter,” he muttered sincerely.

“Yes, you too,” Harry said and lifted Malfoy from the wheelchair despite the blond man’s howls of indignity. “Shut up, Malfoy.”

This time, Malfoy didn’t quiet down; he continued to abuse Harry verbally all the way up to the third floor. By that time, Harry was panting with the effort of holding Malfoy up and he was infinitely grateful when they finally got into the apartment.

“*This* is where you live?” Malfoy sneered. “What a dump.”

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Harry hadn't really been expecting anything less than a mean comment, but considering that it was eleven thirty at night, he had just carried his ex school nemesis up three flights of stairs and his day had just been over all bad, he threw Malfoy unceremoniously onto the couch, knowing that the spell would do its work and keep Malfoy's back protected. "You can sleep there," he growled and went downstairs again to get the wheelchair.

When he finally got back upstairs – twenty minutes or so later, when he'd finally understood how he could fold the wheelchair together to make it small enough to fit through the narrow staircases – Malfoy had fallen asleep, despite the uncomfortable position he'd been left in. His body lay rigid on the couch because of Hermione's spell, the muscles looking like they were working overtime to keep Malfoy's back straight.

Harry rolled his eyes to himself and walked over to the blond. He picked Malfoy up again and walked into his bedroom. He almost laughed at the way it must have looked; Harry Potter, carrying Draco Malfoy into his bedroom.

Gentler this time, Harry placed Malfoy on the bed and pulled the covers over him. Malfoy looked so much nicer when he was asleep, his face no longer screwed up in a sneer.

Beautiful, Hermione had said.

When the moonlight illuminated Malfoy's face and body, Harry admitted she'd been right. He felt something within stir, but quickly shut that train of thought down. He certainly didn't need that on top of everything else.

Sighing, Harry grabbed a pillow from the bed and an extra blanket from his wardrobe and walked out to the living room, where he put the things down. Before lying down, he drank the potion that Hermione had given him. Then he tried to sleep.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter five*

### *In sickness and in health*

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The next morning, Harry awoke to the sound of rain splattering against the windowsill. Slightly confused as to why he was sleeping on the couch rather than on his bed, and in the clothes he'd worn the day before at that, it took him a few moments to recall last night's events. He groaned into his pillow as he realised that Malfoy – Draco Malfoy – was sleeping in his bed. A paralysed Malfoy who would probably be anything but a good guest in Harry's home.

Harry reminded himself that he was only staying today.

But he wondered where Malfoy would go if he didn't stay with Harry. He had said it himself – he didn't have a home to go to.

Sighing, Harry got up and looked out the window, only to be greeted by dark grey skies above and people running around with umbrellas below. In short, typical London weather.

He walked into the kitchen and put on a pot of tea. He got bread, butter and cheese out and set it on the table, then he realised that Malfoy would probably also want breakfast. Once Harry was left for class, Malfoy wouldn't be able to do anything at all. Harry forced the thought away; he didn't want to dwell on just how helpless Malfoy was at the moment.

While the water for the tea warmed, Harry walked to the bedroom door and knocked. When no one answered, he opened the door slightly and went inside.

Malfoy was still asleep, his body as straight as it had been when Harry left him the night before. The room was dark but warm; the room was always warm in the morning when one closed the door during the night. The ventilation wasn't all that great and the sun blared through the windows most of the afternoon when it was actually sunny outside.

Harry saw that Malfoy was sweating and at first he signed it off to the heat in the room, but then he realised that the blond was also shaking. Harry recalled Hermione's words that Malfoy's fever would be mostly gone but not completely. He swiftly walked out to the

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bathroom, where he wet a towel with cold water and picked a thermometer up. Walking back into the bedroom, he pulled the blinds open and then woke Malfoy as he started dabbing the pale forehead with the towel.

Malfoy let out a pained sigh, which confused Harry, since there didn't seem to be anything that could hurt him.

“Good morning,” Harry said pleasantly, deciding to at least try to be nice.

Malfoy didn't answer; he just closed his eyes again against the bright morning sun shining through the window. Harry put the thermometer into his mouth and when it beeped, he took a quick look at it and decided that Malfoy's fever definitely wasn't gone. Thirty-nine point seven.

“How are you feeling?”

“Since you're dabbing my head with a wet cloth and just placed a thermometer into my mouth, you should know that I feel like crap,” Malfoy replied, his voice no more than a whisper.

“Hermione said you'd have a fever for a few more days, 'cause she couldn't take all of the illness out,” Harry said gently.

“Granger probably wouldn't have cured me even if she could have,” Malfoy muttered.

“Hey!” Harry said. “You're alive—“

“Barely.”

“ – so whatever she did worked just fine, this is just the after effects.”

Malfoy didn't reply.

“I'm making breakfast,” Harry said. “You need to eat, so should I bring some in here?”

“I can't very well get out there by myself, can I?” Malfoy said.

Harry ignored the comment. “What do you want?”

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“Nothing. I don’t feel like eating.” At Harry’s look, he gave another of those long-suffering sighs and said, “Fine, give me a piece of toast.”

When Harry got back to the bedroom with Malfoy’s breakfast, Malfoy had fallen asleep again. Harry pulled the blinds shut again and set the tray down on the bedside table. He picked a t-shirt, pants, underwear and a jumper from his drawers to wear for the day, dressed in the bathroom and then went back to the kitchen to eat his own breakfast.

Finishing his morning routine after brushing his teeth and attempting to brush his hair, Harry then made his way to his bedroom again. He filled a glass with water, knowing that it was important for Malfoy to drink since he had a fever. Malfoy woke up at the sound of water pouring.

“Drink,” Harry said simply, holding Malfoy up slightly so that the water didn’t spill all over as he placed the glass to Malfoy’s lips.

Malfoy did as he was told without a sound, perhaps because he wanted to draw as little attention as possible to the fact that he was being fed by his former school nemesis, or perhaps because he was too sick and tired. He ate the cooling piece of toast just as quietly, eyes focusing on a point beyond Harry.

Harry stood. “I need to get to the university,” he said, brushing a few breadcrumbs off his pants. “Will you be all right until I come home? I should be home at about three thirty.”

Before Malfoy had even uttered a word, a blush began creeping over his pale cheeks. “I need to go to the bathroom,” he said, very quietly.

“Oh.” Harry didn’t know what else to say; he had not given this part of Malfoy’s problem any thought at all. “Well, er, then— I can, you know, take you into the bathroom and...” He trailed off, his cheeks even redder than Malfoy’s.

Malfoy gave a short nod of approval – it wasn’t like he was going to allow Harry to do it the same humiliating way they did it at the hospital, where he’d had to pee lying down. He shuddered at the thought as Harry lifted him.

“Am I hurting you?” Harry asked, concern evident in both his voice and actions.

“No,” Malfoy said, and Harry continued to lift him.

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Harry carried him into the bathroom like he'd said. Once there, Harry unbuttoned Malfoy's pants – something that felt very odd indeed; he had never unbuttoned anyone's pants before without the least bit of sexual innuendo behind it. When he was done, Malfoy mumbled, "I'll do it sitting down."

"Are you sure you'll—"

"Potter, give me *some* privacy at least!" Malfoy snapped.

Harry sat him down on the toilet and threw his hands in the air. "Fine. Just— shout when you're done, or something."

He walked outside, shut the door and went over to get his shoes on. He was late for class already, but that would have to come second. It wasn't like Malfoy was actually going to stay there anyway, so it would only be today.

Right. Only today, his mind taunted him. And then where would he go?

"Potter?" came Malfoy's voice. He sounded mortified at having to call for Harry to come and get him. Harry understood, although he couldn't imagine being in the same situation himself. He didn't want to imagine.

"Should I— put you on the sofa instead?" Harry asked, standing in the hallway between his room and the living room and considering the entertainment possibilities in his bedroom. At least the living room had a TV.

"Whatever," Malfoy muttered. His forehead was once again covered in a fine sheet of sweat and he was trembling in Harry's arms. Harry settled him on the couch as comfortably as was possible with the spell still doing its magic. He poured a glass of water and helped Malfoy drink that as well. He placed the TV remote by Malfoy's hand so that he could change channels without having to move. Other than the TV, the entertainment possibilities weren't big. Malfoy couldn't read a magazine or a book, because he couldn't hold it and even if he managed to set it up somehow, he couldn't change pages. He couldn't write, or draw, because that also involved moving. He also wouldn't be able to eat or drink if he got hungry, which was a bit worse than the entertainment issues.

"I'll try to come home during lunch," Harry said, frowning as he thought Malfoy's day through.

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“Afraid that I’ll trash the apartment?” Malfoy asked without humour, voice tired.

Harry’s frown deepened. “Not exactly...”

“I was kidding, Potter,” Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. “Jeez, don’t take everything so seriously. I’m paralysed, not dying. Now move so that I can watch the telly.”

It was not the wit that Harry was used to from school, but at least it was returning, which was a good sign. Malfoy was still sick, so he shouldn’t be up to his usual ‘standards’.

“I’ll still be back at lunch. You’ll need to eat something then, so—”

“Bye, Potter,” Malfoy said, watching the TV and making it clear that Harry should leave.

“Yeah, right. Bye.” Harry left, feeling the same as he had the night before – confused.

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Myra came up to Harry after his first class, smiling. Outside it was still raining, the sky not showing a single sign of stopping its crying session any time soon.

“You certainly seem happier today,” she said. Darius came up on Harry’s other side, nodding, although Harry wasn’t sure he’d heard what Myra had said. Darius tended to just agree with Myra on anything – it was more peaceful that way.

“I do?” Harry said, surprised. He’d have thought he seemed just as distracted as usual. That’s how he felt at least.

“You’re not walking around with a deep frown on your face, at least,” Myra said. “I’d say that’s a change for the better.”

“Bed someone?” Darius immediately shot in. He earned a glare from Myra and a stammering, “N-no,” from Harry.

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“D, just because you have a new girlfriend every week doesn’t mean that Harry gets off from the same thing,” she said and she looked as though she wanted to slap Darius upside the head, but Harry was walking between them so she couldn’t.

Darius seemed to think about this while Myra turned to Harry again. “So, what happened yesterday? ‘Cause I do agree with D, *something* must have happened.”

“I – I just saw an old friend of mine,” Harry said truthfully.

“Only a *friend*?” Darius shot in.

“Yes,” Harry said firmly, “definitely only a friend.”

Darius rolled his eyes at Harry whilst Myra rolled her eyes at Darius. Harry was the only one not rolling his eyes – he was trying to come up with something to say that would not be the truth, but would satisfy his two curious friends.

“We just met at a café,” Harry lied. “He recognized me and said hi, and we started talking. When the café closed, we walked to my place and sat and talked ‘til really late, which was why I overslept this morning.”

There. That sounded plausible, didn’t it? And it was almost like the truth. Sort of.

Myra and Darius eyed him, Myra more carefully than Darius. Darius had always been one to trust easily.

“What’s his name?” Myra asked.

“D – Daniel,” Harry said, deciding that he shouldn’t tell the whole truth. “Daniel Stevens.”

For someone who wasn’t good at lying, Harry thought he was doing a pretty good job at it. Myra was still watching him with a slight crease between her brows, but he thought she would accept it as the truth – after all, why shouldn’t she? It was more believable than the real story.

“Look, we have to get to class,” Harry said, pointing at the clock on the wall further down. “Starts in two minutes.”

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“Shit,” Myra swore. She proceeded to drag Darius unceremoniously with her, as their class was on the other side of the campus. Harry strolled towards his classroom, which was less than a minute away.

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Harry had almost two hours of lunch, but he found that that wasn't really that much time when he had to speed home and back to the university in that time. He fumbled with the keys as he was unlocking the door to his apartment, stressed and hungry.

“Malfoy?” Harry said as he walked into the apartment, taking off his wet shoes and jacket.

On the couch in the living room, Malfoy lay sleeping. The TV was playing some music video. Definitely not music to fall asleep to, but it looked like the blond had managed that feat anyway. Harry stretched out to pick the remote up, but Malfoy woke up with a gasp as soon as he came close.

“Malfoy, it's just me,” Harry said, slightly exasperated at the reaction.

“Oh, Potter,” Malfoy mumbled, his eyes hazy and unfocused as they opened. He definitely wasn't well yet.

Harry went to the kitchen and filled a jug with water. He sat down on the couch next to Malfoy and poured him another glass. Without a word, he helped Malfoy sit up just a little, and the blond drank obediently. Harry couldn't help but notice that Malfoy was still burning up and he seemed worse rather than better. He wondered if he should contact Hermione again, but he didn't want to do it. Although it hadn't been the memory assault he had expected, it still had felt strange to talk and interact with her once more.

“Should I take you back to the bedroom?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, I'm not really watching the telly anyway,” Malfoy mumbled.

Because of the spell, Harry didn't have to be as careful as he otherwise would have had to be. Actually, if it hadn't been for the spell, Harry wouldn't have been able to lift Malfoy at all – not without risking serious injury, at least. With the spell, however, Malfoy was ‘bendable’ to a certain degree, so that it was possible to carry him, just like it was possible for him to sit up in

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a wheelchair. Harry didn't understand the spell Hermione had cast, but then again, he didn't have to understand it. He just had to know it worked.

Settling Malfoy down on the bed in Harry's bedroom, Harry pulled the covers over Malfoy and tried to make him as comfortable as possible.

"D'you mind," Malfoy mumbled barely audible as Harry smoothed the covers, "if I stay here 'nother day?"

Harry gave a small smile. "Not really," he said. "You should stay here 'til you get better."

"Mm, 'til I get better," Malfoy agreed, falling asleep once more.

Harry hurried to cook some lunch before running back to the university.

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The next two days were almost identical to the first one. Malfoy slept on Harry's bed while Harry had the couch. Harry fed Malfoy, helped him to the bathroom and washed him off. He did this in the bed, since Harry's apartment didn't have a bathtub and Malfoy couldn't stand in the shower. Malfoy didn't seem to be getting the least bit better; instead, his fever became slightly higher again and he was only awake for a few, short moments.

"Do you want me to get Hermione again?" Harry asked on the third morning as he poured water into Malfoy's mouth.

"No," Malfoy said once he'd swallowed. "She 'an't do 'nything."

Harry said no more; after all, it was up to Malfoy if he wanted to get professional help or not and since he had said no, Harry would just have to sit back and watch.

On the morning of the fourth day, however, Harry stuck the thermometer into Malfoy's mouth as usual, expecting his temperature to be somewhere around thirty-nine as before. When he pulled it out, though, it showed thirty-eight point one – a vast improvement from the night before. Taking a good look at Malfoy, he decided that the blond did look better. The shadows beneath his eyes were less pronounced than before and his eyes weren't as hazy.

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“I know I’m dashing, but you can stop staring at me now,” Malfoy said and Harry decided that Malfoy was definitely getting better.

Still, as Malfoy’s fever disappeared, both young men became aware of just how much Malfoy still needed assistance doing. The first time Harry had to feed Malfoy after he got well again was disastrous – when Malfoy had been sick, he had just accepted Harry’s feeding him. Now, he strongly objected to it.

“Like hell you’re going to feed me like some little baby,” he spat as Harry entered the room with a tray containing Malfoy’s dinner later on the fourth day: mashed potatoes, meatballs, slices of carrot and cucumber and one drop of Hermione’s potion for Malfoy’s back.

“Malfoy, you can’t raise your arms more than an inch above your lap – how in Merlin’s name are you going to feed yourself?” Harry sighed deeply. After three days with a sick and easy-to-handle Malfoy, this return of the old, cocky brat Harry had known before was highly unwelcome.

“You are not going to feed me and that’s that!” Malfoy said, proving himself to be the three-year-old in a grown-up’s body that Harry believed he was.

Malfoy glared and Harry stared squarely back. “Fine,” Harry finally said and set the tray next to the bed where Malfoy would have had no problem to reach it if he had been able to move around freely. “When you’re finished with the whole spoiled brat routine, you can call me and I might come.”

Malfoy’s glare followed him as he left the room.

Two hours later, Harry had since long since finished his own dinner and was watching a documentary on the TV and doing his homework at the same time. He hadn’t checked on Malfoy since he’d left, although he knew that the other would never call for him. To ask for help would be too strong a blow to Malfoy’s ego for him to take. So Harry sighed and stood from amidst his books. The reporter was talking about the old palace on Crete, Knossos, and about how the people who lived there four thousand years ago knew how to make ceramics that were as thin as an eggshell. Apparently, it wasn’t possible to make such fine ceramics today, but four millennia ago, they had been able to.

Malfoy was staring into the wall, his stormy grey eyes glaring furiously at the wall. Beside the bed stood the tray of food, still full.

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“Not hungry, Malfoy?” Harry asked, unable to resist.

Malfoy didn't answer. Harry saw a vein by his temple twitch slightly; a sign that told Harry that Malfoy was seething. Malfoy's eyes also narrowed slightly and he looked like he wanted to cross his arms over his chest. Malfoy's anger was understandable, Harry thought, but he couldn't help but think that it was his own fault.

Since Malfoy refused to answer, Harry just picked the tray up from the bedside table and left. A minute and a half later, he returned, the food warm again after a bout in the microwave. Harry returned it to the low table by the bed and sat down next to Malfoy. Without another word, he picked the plate up in one hand and the fork up in the other, and proceeded to feed Malfoy as he had intended to do two hours ago. Malfoy didn't say a word; he accepted the food without so much as a look at Harry. When the plate was empty, Harry held the water to Malfoy's lips and so that he could drink, eyes still trained on the opposite wall as though it was the most interesting thing in the world. Finally the dinner was finished and Harry left the room, still without a word exchanged between the two of them.

And so it went.

After the dinner incident, Harry and Malfoy didn't talk at all. To begin with, Harry signed Malfoy's silence off to humiliation and anger. It seemed more than likely after the feeding-incident and besides, Harry had no reason to think it was anything more. They fell into a routine.

Harry woke Malfoy in the morning after eating his own breakfast. He fed Malfoy and then took him to the bathroom where he brushed Malfoy's teeth and Malfoy did his business by himself, after Harry had helped him inside and with his pants. Harry didn't blush anymore as he undid Malfoy's pants and pushed his trousers down, nor did he look away the first time he helped Malfoy into the shower. They placed a chair in the shower; Harry carried Malfoy there and undressed him. He left Malfoy's underwear on, for nothing else than because he felt that Malfoy should have some privacy left, even after Harry had helped him with it when he went to the bathroom.

“Okay, tell me if it's too hot or too cold,” Harry said as though talking to a child, although he knew that Malfoy wouldn't answer. It had been a week and a half since he'd come to live with Harry and he hadn't uttered a single word, or even any sound at all since the fourth day.

Harry adjusted the water to what he hoped would be an all right temperature and let the water soak Malfoy's hair and body. He had been getting regular showers now since the fifth day,

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after Harry realised that they could put a chair in the shower so that Malfoy didn't have to stand.

Harry lathered Malfoy's hair with shampoo and washed his body off. All the while, Malfoy only stared at the wall in front of him, eyes unseeing, as he had been doing since Harry returned to his bedroom to feed him almost a week ago.

Harry had begun wondering now, if the silence didn't have some other reason. Malfoy's eyes hadn't been unseeing like this ever before, his demeanour never so submissive, so ignorant of the world. Harry wondered more and more and came up with a guess of his own – that it was self-defence, or perhaps self-preservation, rather than anger and humiliation.

At least he hoped that it was something more trivial like that, rather than some illness that should be treated. He wondered if he should take Malfoy to Hermione, but then told himself that there was nothing actually *wrong* with Malfoy, but for the fact that he was completely unresponsive. He wasn't *sick*. Signing it off to self-defence was easy and had its points.

While at the hospital, Malfoy had only been faced with strangers; doctors and nurses without familiar faces and names, who treated him best they could but were never personal in any way. He was also fed Muggle medication, which Harry believed to have been poisoning Malfoy for more than just those last few days, which was why he'd been sick for several days after Hermione had healed him. It was like a person addicted to cigarettes – when he quit, the poison was still left in his system and it took a few days to get out, therefore he was sick for another four days.

During those four days in Harry's home, he had been all but unconscious. He had been like a baby; in need of almost constant attention when his fever rose yet again and he needed help with everything he did, even basic things like washing his hands or drinking a glass of water.

When the fever disappeared, the need for constant attention disappeared, but Malfoy's need for help had not. Although the spell was slowly releasing its hold on him – he could now raise his hands almost three inches off his lap and turn his head ever so slightly – Malfoy still needed to be taken care of. Still, the need of help was no bigger – in fact it was less – than at the hospital. So, the problem didn't reside solely in the matter of needing help; it also resided in the fact that it was someone he knew that took care of him. And that someone was Harry Potter.

Draco Malfoy had never been one to show his weaknesses, least of all to his enemies.

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Harry sighed and dried Malfoy off.

Malfoy didn't look like the Quidditch player Harry had known in school anymore. After a month and a half in a hospital bed, most of Malfoy's muscles had disappeared, leaving him thin and breakable. His skin was as pale as ever, except, Harry noted, on Malfoy's lower back, where the skin was red, hot and slightly swollen.

"Bed sore," Harry mumbled to himself and made a mental note to smooth Malfoy's covers out completely, so that the area wasn't further annoyed. He had read about bedsores; they could become worse and kill the skin completely if it wasn't treated. Malfoy didn't react as Harry dabbed a cooling salve on the swollen area. Nor did he react as Harry dressed him in a pair of his own pyjamas, before lifting him up and carrying him back into the bedroom. He placed Malfoy back under the covers.

"So, Malfoy, how long are you going to keep quiet?" Harry asked. He continued, as though he expected Malfoy to answer at some point, "It is really nice, of course, to have you shut up for once, but, well... Besides, I thought you didn't want to be here. We said only one night, right? It's been almost two weeks."

But Malfoy didn't answer; he only lay on the bed, silently staring at the opposite wall. Harry wondered if he was seeing the wall at all, or if it was something else entirely. Harry sighed and stretched his hand out to pull a lock of damp hair out of Malfoy's face.

He watched Malfoy's closed off face for another few moments, sighed and then he left the room. Exhausted already, he sat down in the living room to attempt doing his homework.

\*

It became increasingly difficult for Harry to keep Myra and Darius from the apartment. They tended to come and go as they wished, especially Darius, and since they both saw Harry well but tired at the university, they saw no reason why they couldn't come home with him all of a sudden.

"You know," Myra said with a suspicious look, "you never cared that much about your studies before."

Harry had just told her that he had too much homework and thus she couldn't come over.

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“I know, but, you know, the end of term is coming up and I want to have studied well for once,” Harry said, although it sounded lame even to his own ears. It was still three months until the end of term. He shoved his hands into his pockets and continued walking down the corridor.

“What is it you’re hiding?” Myra asked. “Cause there is something.”

Darius chuckled. “Perhaps it’s that old classmate.”

Harry’s knuckles tightened to the point where they turned white, but he managed not to show how close to home Darius was hitting.

“Oh don’t be stupid,” Myra said. “If Harry decided to get a roommate he would tell us. Right, Harry?”

“Um, yeah, right,” Harry said avoiding Myra’s eyes. This, of course, increased her suspiciousness.

“*Right*, Harry?”

“Yes, I said!” Harry said, agitation rising within. His friends were usually not this suspicious of him – of course, Harry usually didn’t hide a paralysed ex-arch nemesis in his apartment. Still, they shouldn’t be like this.

Harry was glad to finally reach his classroom and said good bye to his friends quite coolly, hoping that his two friends would understand his hint and stop asking questions. Myra exchanged a look with Darius, who shrugged, but they didn’t question him further. They continued towards their classroom.

\*

On a late Thursday afternoon, Harry found himself back at his favourite café, Espresso House. Sitting down to drink a latte, he picked up a schoolbook from his bag to read. He wouldn’t stay for long. Malfoy was, of course, at home, and they would both need dinner. Still, Harry couldn’t deal with going home just yet. He had to get some studying done and lately, he never seemed to be able to get it done at home. Malfoy didn’t make a sound, but

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somehow, Harry felt his presence the whole time and it disturbed him. The silence was overwhelming and it made him unable to concentrate. Thus, after classes that day, he decided to catch a break at the café.

He had only just sat down when Mona came over to him.

“Hello, Mr. Evans,” she said.

“Hi, Mona,” Harry replied politely, wishing she’d go away.

She was cleaning the tables, putting used cups and plates in a green container. “How are you today?”

“I’m fine and you?” Polite, non-committing conversation that had absolutely no point, Harry knew. He wanted her to disappear so that he could drown himself in coffee and his book.

“I’m all right,” she said. “Although when it’s good weather like this, there’s a lot more people than on the days when it’s raining. It’s a lot to do.”

“I see,” Harry said, not really sure what he was supposed to reply. He took a sip of his coffee.

“But it’s still a job,” Mona continued, never noticing that he wasn’t the least bit interested. “And I need the money. Good jobs with good money are quite rare today. Although I guess you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, Mr. Evans?”

She giggled slightly at this and Harry wondered if a blush would creep up on her cheeks too. It didn’t, but she smiled up at him in a way that she probably hoped to be cute. Harry saw a line of even but yellowish teeth, testament of smoking. Her breath reeked of it too; had done so since the first time he met her.

“Well,” Harry said, “I am quite happy that I don’t have to work like this. I’m lucky.”

She giggled again, as though he had just told a big joke. Harry, who was getting more and more uncomfortable by the minute, desperately wished she would go away.

“Yes, you are, but you deserve it,” she said, fluttering her eyelashes at him.

*“You deserve it, Harry. I honestly don’t know what I would do without you.”*

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Harry downed the rest of his coffee and coughed as he swallowed wrongly. He hadn't thought about Ginny in several years.

"I need to go," he said, putting the book back into his bag without having read so much as a word of what it said and dashing out from the café before Mona had time to react. He felt rude, but when he compared the eerie silence of Malfoy to the chatterbox that was Mona, he preferred Malfoy by far.

When Harry came home, Malfoy lay still on the couch. Putting his things down, Harry made his way to the kitchen where he cooked pasta and made chicken for dinner. As was his routine, he fed Malfoy where he was, in a half-sitting position on the couch. He'd become much more efficient in the last two weeks at feeding Malfoy – not that Malfoy was hard to feed, but it was still an experience to feed another grown-up man.

The phone rang when Harry was almost finished feeding Malfoy. He set the plate aside, stood up and walked to pick up the receiver that lay on the kitchen table.

"Hello?"

"Hello darling, it's Pally."

"Oh, hi," Harry said, smiling at the sound of his agent's voice, Ms Palesa Devan, or as she preferred to be called – Pally. Harry had known her for almost five years.

"Honey, I'm sorry to sound rude, but I am calling about business, you know," she said.

Harry sighed. "Yes, I know, the new book."

"How is it coming along?"

"Not so good, I'm sorry to say," Harry admitted. "I've been— preoccupied."

"You sound tired, Harry, is everything all right?" Pally always worried for him, ever since the day she'd first met him, sitting outside a Muggle clothes store.

"An old friend of mine got into a serious accident a few weeks ago," Harry told Pally. "He's paralysed from the waist down and— well, currently, he's living with me."

"Oh my," said Pally and Harry could hear the frown on her face. "Will he be all right?"

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“I don’t know. The doctors couldn’t tell and one of my friends who studies medicine couldn’t say either. Only time will tell.” Harry knew he sounded defeated and more tired than he really was, but he knew that Pally always wanted him to tell her when something was troubling him. He couldn’t talk to his friends right now; they could get too directly involved in it – they *were* too involved with his life. Pally on the other hand was his agent and an old friend, but she didn’t see him very often and she had no direct contact with anything in his life. It was hard to explain, but to spill things to Pally was easier than to tell his friends. It was *safe*.

“When did you say this happened?”

“Um— five weeks ago,” Harry said.

“Honey, you should have told me!” Pally said. “As it is, the company expects your next book within three months – and they want a rough draft in two weeks.”

“Two weeks?” Harry repeated dumbly even though he’d known that it was the set date.

When Pally continued, she sounded concerned. “Harry, what is wrong? You’ve never had any trouble with your writing. Then all of a sudden, you can’t write?”

“Writer’s block, I guess,” Harry muttered.

She tut-ed at him. “Don’t be like that, Harry, brooding won’t get you nowhere.”

“Now you sound like yourself again, rather than like a shrink,” Harry teased her. “Still having trouble with the English language.”

“I could beat you in any English language competition you could ever come up with,” she said, sounding as though she was looking down at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Harry said, laughing a little.

“Now, get back to that book and write another awesome book that will leave me – and the rest of the world – begging for more after we’re finished.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said, saluting although she couldn’t see him.

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When he hung up the phone, he had a grin on his face again. It felt strange but good to smile. Feeling happier than he had in days, he returned to the living room where he continued to feed Malfoy the last of his dinner before sitting down to eat himself.

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## *Chapter six Awakening*

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“Hello Harry.”

“Myra? What are you doing here?” Harry asked, shocked and suddenly nervous. It was Saturday; he’d counted on a relaxing day without having to worry about his friends. “You can’t—“

“Can’t what, Harry? Come in?” Myra raised an eyebrow at him. “Is it something dangerous you’re keeping in there?”

“No, no,” Harry said, panicking, through the decimetre wide opening. “No, nothing dangerous, I swear.”

Myra pushed the door open with surprising strength. Now standing in the hallway, she stood with her arms crossed and glared at Harry, who gripped the back of the door uneasily. Myra looked quite pissed and she was not one to cross when she was angry.

“Okay,” she said, “if it’s nothing dangerous, you won’t have anything against me seeing it. Or *him*.”

“It’s not – I mean—” Finally, Harry gave up and sighed deeply. “All right.”

He walked down the small corridor to his living room, where Malfoy lay on the couch. He had a blanket pulled over his legs, up to his waist, and he was staring blankly in front of him as he had done for two weeks. The television was on, showing a young woman with fake blonde hair and too much make-up.

“Myra, this is Draco Malfoy. Malfoy, this is my friend Myra,” Harry said.

As predicted, Malfoy didn’t move an inch. His eyes stayed on the TV, staring without seeing. Myra stood with her mouth open, looking at Malfoy with wide eyes.

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“Malfoy is paralysed from the waist down,” Harry said, motioning towards the wheelchair that stood in the corner of the room. “He is living with me right now, ‘cause he has no place else to go.”

“Why— he’s not moving,” Myra said, a slight frown marring her features.

Harry sighed and studied the floor. “He’s been like that for more than two weeks,” he said. “Doesn’t talk, doesn’t see, doesn’t seem to hear. I don’t know what’s wrong and he is allergic to Mug – I mean, he’s allergic to most medicines.”

“Allergic?” Myra repeated dumbly. She shook her head to clear it. “But what does he do here? And why isn’t he in the hospital instead?”

“Didn’t you hear what I just said? He’s allergic to almost all medicines, so the hospital can’t do anything for him,” Harry said. Frustration apparent in his voice, he continued, “What he does here? He eats when I feed him, sleeps at night, watches the telly when I put him out here, showers when I shower him, and the rest of the time, he stares into the wall.”

He paused to glare at Myra. “Do you understand why I didn’t want you to come now?”

Myra raised her eyes from Malfoy to look at him. “Actually, no, I don’t,” she said. “I still don’t understand why you were hiding this from us. What do you think? That we’d think less of you because you’re helping an old friend? Why would that be bad in any way?”

Her voice didn’t hold so much anger as irritation and something close to curiosity.

“I don’t know,” Harry muttered. “I didn’t know what you’d say and he’s not acting like a sane human being exactly, so I had no idea what you would have thought.”

Myra rolled her eyes and smiled slightly. “Harry, you are so stupid that I want to slap you sometimes. Why in the world would we think less of you for helping your friend? You are so silly.”

Harry smiled back slightly. He decided to not mention that he and Malfoy had never been friends. It seemed irrelevant.

“Why don’t we sit down and have some tea?” Harry asked, leading Myra through the living room to the kitchen. He set a kettle of water on the stove as Myra took a seat by the small table. They were both silent. The only sound was the water as it began to heat up.

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Just as Harry was about to pour some for Myra, the doorbell rang.

“Excuse me,” he said.

He left the kitchen and walked down the hallway to the door. He opened it just as Hermione was about to ring the doorbell again.

“Hi,” she smiled. At his startled look, she continued, “Am I interrupting something?”

“What? No, no, not at all,” Harry said. “I was just – surprised.”

“Oh, that’s understandable,” she said. “I think I would have been too.”

He smiled slightly. “Come in,” he said, finding his manners. He helped her off with her jacket and told her she could put her shoes wherever she wanted. She noticed Myra’s jacket, which she had taken off hastily as Harry had led her into the apartment to see Malfoy.

“Company?” Hermione asked.

“A friend came over.” Harry showed her down the corridor to the kitchen. “This is Myra. Myra, this is Hermione Granger. She’s an old friend from school.”

“Nice to meet you,” Myra said, stretching her hand out. Hermione took it with a smile.

“Nice to meet you too,” she replied. “So are you two—”

“No, no, definitely not,” Myra said with a laugh as Harry turned slightly pink. “We’re just friends. Besides, Harry—”

“—doesn’t want a girlfriend at the moment,” Harry interrupted and sent a warning look at Myra, behind Hermione’s back. Myra looked momentarily confused, but then she understood and nodded.

“He wants to stay single,” she said. “Although I keep telling him, with those looks, he could have anyone, any time.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. “You know,” she said, “She’s right. I didn’t get a chance to look at you the last time, but you do look very nice, Harry.”

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Harry's blush deepened. "Thank you, 'Mione," he said, studying the floor.

"So where do you two know each other from?" Hermione asked.

"University," Myra replied. "We go to the same one. We met through a friend of mine."

"That's— nice," Hermione said.

Silence fell and Harry felt the need to break it. "We were just about to have some tea and scones. Would you like some as well?" he asked.

"Sure, if you don't mind," Hermione said with a quick look at Myra, who shrugged.

"You're welcome to stay if you want to, I don't mind," Myra said.

"I'm not going to stay that long," Hermione said. "I need to get back to work – I was really only stopping by to see how you were doing with Malfoy."

"He's sleeping on the couch," Harry said, setting the tray of scones and tea on the table. "Or maybe he's watching the telly. I don't know. He's been sort of— out of it, the last two weeks."

"He has? That's strange. I should take a look at him," Hermione said. Harry found the butter and cheese in the fridge, and placed it next to the scones.

"Feel free – I don't have a clue what I'm looking for," Harry said.

"So are you a nurse?" Myra asked.

"No, I'm a Hea – I'm a doctor," Hermione said, pouring water into her cup and letting the tea sink down into the water.

Myra raised an eyebrow, impressed. "You seem young to be a doctor," she said.

"Hermione was at the top of our class when we left school," Harry said, taking a sip of his tea. "She's the most ambitious person I know."

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Well, I’m still learning,” Hermione said, blushing slightly. “It will be another year before I’m fully trained. What do you study?” Hermione sounded desperate for a change of topics.

“I study law; I’m going to become a lawyer,” Myra said.

“What kind of lawyer?” Hermione asked. She bit into a scone with butter and cheese. “These are delicious, Harry. Did you make them yourself?”

“Yes, actually, I do,” Harry said, blushing once again.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Hermione said, looking at Myra. “I interrupted you. Go on.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m studying family law,” Myra said.

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. “Sounds interesting.”

“It is,” Myra said. “There are so many subjects that you can get into...”

As Hermione and Myra became involved in a conversation on family law, Harry stood up with a newly made scone on a plate and some tea. He left the kitchen without the two women noticing at all and walked into the living room instead. The telly now showed a man holding a woman half his age, kissing her and holding what seemed to be a very serious conversation at the same time. Another soap, then.

Harry sat down on the couch next to Malfoy.

“Here’s a scone,” Harry said and held it up to the blond. “Would you like some?”

As expected, Malfoy didn’t reply. Harry sighed softly and broke off a piece. He held it to Malfoy’s mouth and the blond ate.

“Hermione is here,” Harry told him. “And Myra too. I tried to keep Myra away— I don’t know why, but I did.”

He fed Malfoy another piece of scone. The scene was somehow calming to Harry. He could hear Hermione and Myra talk in the kitchen, their voices like a murmur in the background. Outside, the sky was dark red. The sun had disappeared only minutes ago. Malfoy lay on the bed, pale and unseeing. His frame looked small under the blankets, like a child, except for his face. His face wore the marks of war, scars marring the perfect skin and lines, scars that

## *The Depths of Winter*

should not have been there on someone so young. His hair wasn't groomed and slicked back like when they had been in school together. Harry didn't see the reason why he should gel it when it looked fine without the gel. He reached forward and pushed a wayward strand back.

He gave Malfoy a few more pieces of the scone, wishing that he knew just what was wrong. He found himself wishing, just like he had done a million times the last two weeks, that Malfoy would wake up from whatever stupor he was in.

"How long are you going to do this zombie-thing anyway?" Harry asked. "Cause you know, it's not that much fun to watch."

He hadn't noticed Hermione and Myra finishing their conversation, so he didn't realise that they were now standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room.

"How is he?"

Harry jumped at the sound of Hermione's voice. Crumbs left over from the scone fell from the plate in his hand onto the blanket covering Malfoy. Harry turned to his two friends.

"Same as he has been for two weeks. He doesn't seem to notice that I'm here at all," Harry said.

"Nothing?" Hermione asked. "That's strange."

"He's been like this since his fever disappeared, four days into his stay here. He is like a robot – he chews and swallows when I give him food, he drinks when I give him water, he pees when I put him in the bathroom— He just doesn't seem alive anymore. Like it's only the shell left."

"How often do you feed him?" Hermione asked him.

"Three meals a day and a fruit in the middle of the afternoon if I'm home," Harry replied.

"That sounds good," Hermione said. "But he doesn't react to things?"

"No, he doesn't," Harry said, shaking his head.

"Maybe I should take him back to the hospital with me," Hermione said. "We'll run some tests and see if we can find out what's wrong."

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry shook his head again. “No offence, ‘Mione, but I don’t think that there’s anything your tests could tell us that will fix the problem. I’m guessing it’s all in Malfoy’s head.”

“Still, don’t you think it would be better if I take him? It seems like an awful lot of work for you.”

“Nah, thanks ‘Mione, but I told him he could stay until he got well,” Harry said with a small smile. “I guess he’s not well yet. And besides, I’ve gotten used to having him here.”

Myra had stood silently and followed the conversation so far, but now she spoke up. “I agree with Harry, actually,” she said to Hermione. “I took a course in psychology a few years ago and this seems like something inside Malfoy’s head rather than something you can do tests on. Besides, Harry told me that Malfoy is allergic to medicines anyway.”

Hermione pressed her lips together. “Fine,” she said, sounding much colder than before. “He can stay here. But you know where to find me if he’s too much. Knowing what he was like in school, I’m guessing it won’t be too long before he becomes a real nuisance.”

Harry and Myra both stared at her, although Myra’s stare was less apparent than Harry’s. “‘Mione, what’s up with you?”

“With me?” Hermione said, voice warming up again. “Nothing.”

Harry frowned at her. The air was getting thick with tension. Myra was the one to break the silence.

“I should head home now,” Myra said, her voice loud in the quiet room. Malfoy still sat staring in front of him as he had before.

Harry nodded to Myra. “It was – I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he said to her. “It just felt— private, I suppose.”

Myra smiled at him, walking through the room and down the corridor with Harry following her. She picked her coat off the hanger and turned to him.

“It’s okay, Harry. Really. I can see a little of why you reasoned as you did,” she said. “Not completely, of course, but then again, I don’t think I’ve ever been able to understand you completely.”

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Harry grinned at her. “Colour me complicated, huh?”

“Something like that.” She hugged him and opened the door. “See you tomorrow at Uni?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. Bye.”

Myra left and Harry walked back to the living room, where Hermione had sat down next to Malfoy and was doing a few spells on him. Harry watched, unable to understand any of what Hermione was doing. Numbers appeared above Hermione and she seemed to know what they meant, so Harry left her at it. Finally, Hermione stood and faced Harry.

“His back is much better now,” she told him. “The spell will have worn off in two weeks, just like I said it would.”

“Should I keep giving him the medicine?” Harry asked.

Hermione nodded and picked out a vial from her bag, which had suddenly appeared next to her. “Here’s some more in case you’re running low,” she said. “Remember, three times a day.”

Harry nodded. “I haven’t forgotten it so far,” he said, smiling at her.

Hermione smiled back and then looked at her watch. “Well, I have to leave too – I told you I couldn’t stay that long.”

She walked over and hugged him. “It was nice seeing you again,” Harry said. “Perhaps next time, we can have lunch or something and, you know, talk some more.”

She smiled again. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Oh, Hermione?” Harry asked, just as she was about to leave.

“Yes?”

“How did you know where I live?”

She smiled. “I looked you up under Harry Evans in the telephone book. I heard the nurse call you ‘Evans’ rather than ‘Potter’.”

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“Oh, okay.” Harry gave her a small smile back in understanding.

“Here, Harry,” she said and handed him a note. “My address and phone number. If you’d like to talk or see me.

“Thanks, ‘Mione.”

“You’re welcome. Bye, Harry.”

“Bye, ‘Mione.”

Then she too had left Harry’s apartment and Harry was once again alone with Malfoy.

He walked back into the living room to clean up the scone crumbs that had fallen on the blanket earlier. He bent down and scooped them up in his hand, straightening out the blanket at the same time.

“So, Malfoy, now you’ve met Myra too. Not that you noticed, but...” He trailed off, watching the blond on the couch with an expression that was probably sad to an onlooker. Harry wasn’t *sad*, not really. He was more like a bit depressed, more so with every day that passed without Malfoy getting any better. Taking care of him was taking its toll on Harry as well. It was a fulltime commitment, more so since Malfoy had become unable to speak and act. Maybe he should have let Hermione take him? But then again, that somehow seemed wrong; a gut feeling telling him that Malfoy should stay here, in Harry’s care. He didn’t know why, but he trusted the feeling.

For every day that passed, though, the frustration with Malfoy’s un-responsiveness grew within. He didn’t want to admit it to himself, but he knew that one of the reasons why he wanted Malfoy to go back to his normal, annoying self was that Harry had, somewhere along the line, started to care.

He sank down to his knees next to Malfoy.

“Just wake up for God’s sakes,” Harry cried. He slapped Malfoy lightly over the cheek. Then he realised what he’d done and he felt bad, crawling up on the sofa to sit by Malfoy’s head. “Sorry,” he mumbled to the blond, who, of course, took no notice. Harry raked his hand through his hair, leaning back into the cushions, wanting to sink further into them until he disappeared.

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He sat there, listening to the sounds outside the window; the birds chirping happily, the soft wind rustling the leaves. He let his mind wander and worry about the book came forth. It was a worry he hadn't let himself think about, but the truth was that Pally was right – he'd never had a problem writing any of his previous books. This one, though— it just didn't want to be written. The words didn't flow from his hands like they had before and Harry missed the feeling. He loved writing; he'd loved it for years. Even back at the Dursleys', Harry had been writing, although nothing serious and involved like his books had later been.

Harry allowed himself a brief moment to recall his time at Hogwarts. There had been a lot of writing, but not anything in the way of novels and shorter stories. There, it had all been academic – and Hermione was always the one to shine in that part of life.

Half way through seventh year, Harry had begun keeping a diary. He didn't write in it every night like he knew Hermione did; instead, he wrote when he had something to tell.

*"Writing again, Harry? What about?"*

Ron.

It hurt to think of his best friend, but it was a good memory, and Harry let it continue.

*"Snape," Harry said.*

*Ron made a face. "I hope it's nothing positive about the git."*

*"But Ron," Harry said, "don't you know I've been secretly in love with the tall, dark and ob-so-handsome Potions Professor of ours for years?"*

*Ron threw a pillow at him. "You're giving me nightmares."*

*"Tall, dark and ob-so-evil, instead?"*

*"s much more like it," Ron said. "Handsome and Snape in the same sentence..." He shuddered. "There should be a law against that."*

*Harry smiled and finished his entry in the book before putting it and the quill away. "Want to beat me in chess again?"*

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*“Always.”*

Ron had beaten him. He always beat Harry in chess. And ever since Ron’s death, Harry hadn’t touched a chessboard.

It was partially due to Ron that he had begun to write seriously. It was after he’d left the Wizarding world, after it had become too much, that he’d needed an outlet for his feelings. His first book had been written in less than three months and the words had just flowed, sentences bringing a story together and drawing the reader in. Pally had been the first to read it, the first to love it. After her came thousands of readers – the readers that were now eagerly awaiting his new book, which, despite its unfinished status, had been set for release in the fall.

He wondered if that was the problem – he *had* to write. He’d never *had* to write before. He’d written his second book before the first one had gained any publicity and his third one while the world was still enjoying his second. Now it had been almost two years since his last book.

*“As it is, the company expects your next book within three months – and they want a rough draft in two weeks.”*

A rough draft in two weeks. Harry wanted to tell them to go do something anatomically impossible to themselves.

Harry shot a look out the window – and was surprised to see that darkness had fallen. He hadn’t realised how long he’d been sitting there, unconsciously petting Malfoy’s hair and thinking about his book and— Hogwarts. Sighing, Harry made to get up from the couch.

Just then, a soft sigh was heard. Harry wouldn’t have noticed it at all if it wasn’t for the fact that Malfoy hadn’t made any sound at all in two weeks.

“Malfoy?”

Harry turned so that he could see Malfoy’s face and eyes. He frowned; in Malfoy’s eyes, there was still no recognition or energy. He was still staring emptily in front of him, unknowingly and unseeingly. Thinking it was his imagination – and hopes – running wild, Harry was just about to stand and leave again, when Malfoy did something else that he hadn’t done since he’d gone into his living coma.

He slowly let his eyelids fall shut in a slow blink.

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When Malfoy's eyes had opened again, Harry could tell that they were no longer staring blindly at the wall in front of him.

"Malfoy?" Harry repeated quietly.

Malfoy blinked again, but didn't say anything. Still, this response was more than Harry had seen in two weeks, so he was overjoyed with it. It felt strange to feel so happy over something that Malfoy had done, but Harry refused to dwell on it.

Malfoy's eyes went up to look at Harry. He seemed confused and tired. Soon, he closed his eyes again, this time to sleep. Sinking back into the couch again, Harry decided that he didn't need to get up at all. Instead, he sat next to Malfoy for several hours afterwards, continuing to unconsciously pet Malfoy's hair every few minutes in a calming motion.

He felt strangely peaceful.

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## *Chapter seven*

### *Getting better*

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Sunday morning dawned bright and clear and found Harry sitting in the exact same position as he had been the night before, his hand resting lightly on the top of Malfoy's head. He stirred and groaned, hand coming up to rub at his neck as pained nerves made themselves known. The position he'd been sleeping in hadn't been the most comfortable.

The events of the day before came back as soon as he opened his eyes and saw Malfoy, still asleep on the couch. He wondered if the blond would be more lucid today or if yesterday had been the result of his imagination.

Only one way to find out.

Harry shook Malfoy lightly, calling his name softly. Whether or not Malfoy was more aware today, it was still time to get up and have breakfast.

Malfoy sighed softly, just like he had the day before and it was enough for Harry to know.

"Glad you're back, Malfoy," he said and stood up, stretching his aching muscles.

Malfoy opened his eyes and his eyes followed Harry's movements slowly, tiredly, as though he was getting used to doing it again – which he indeed was. He didn't utter a word, but kept his eyes steadily on Harry as Harry watched him.

"Would you like some breakfast?" Harry asked.

A slight crease appeared between Malfoy's eyebrows as though he was thinking about it. Finally, he nodded, the motion still very slow, the movement small.

Harry couldn't help but smile brightly at Malfoy before turning to the kitchen. He didn't dwell on just why he was so happy that Malfoy was coming back, instead he just enjoyed the feeling of happiness that it brought him.

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He served Malfoy breakfast consisting of yoghurt, a sandwich and milk to drink.

“How are you feeling?” Harry asked as he sat down next to Malfoy on the couch with the food-filled tray. Malfoy followed his movements carefully, as though still in a daze but not ignorant as before. He seemed there but still not quite. He nodded slowly and Harry took it as a ‘better’.

“Hungry?”

Harry broke off a piece of the sandwich and held for Malfoy to eat, all the while studying him carefully. What had happened the previous day to make Malfoy suddenly come back? What had he done differently? He couldn't come up with an answer to either question. Perhaps it had just been time for Malfoy to wake up, or something? Harry frowned in confusion.

Meanwhile, Malfoy seemed to be studying Harry just as intently, his eyes hazily going over Harry's features. There was slight interest and something else, unidentifiable, in his gaze as he watched Harry.

The strange breakfast ended when Malfoy had finished his yoghurt and drank all the milk Harry gave him. Harry stood and walked to the kitchen, where he made breakfast for himself. He read the newspaper hoping for inspiration for his book, which was how he was going to spend the day – he had to try to continue writing.

The apartment was silent, when Harry suddenly heard a small cry.

He shot up from his chair and in four strides, he was next to Malfoy on the couch, where he had left the blond not ten minutes ago.

The grey eyes seemed hazier than before, more out of focus. At first Harry thought Malfoy was sick, but then he noticed the way the blond was blanching out, first for a few seconds before coming back, then again and again, each time his eyes being blanch for a little longer.

“No!” Harry cried forcefully to Malfoy. “Don't go all ignorant on me again!”

But Harry's demand was to no avail, for with one more pleading look at Harry, Malfoy's eyes once again became unseeing, his body still and quiet. It was like before; Malfoy was gone, leaving only a shell behind.

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Harry sank down on his knees next to Malfoy, banging his head on the soft cushions of the couch.

“Now it’s my turn to say it,” Harry grumbled. “Fuck you, Malfoy, fuck you. Why the hell couldn’t you just *stay here* now that we managed to get you back from your vegetable state? What did I do wrong? Did I say something? You know, perhaps giving you to Hermione wouldn’t be such a bad idea. Perhaps at St Mungo’s they could figure out what is wrong with you.”

He trailed off, still leaning his head against the cushions.

What had he done wrong? What was it that he had done differently in the last twelve hours that made Malfoy wake up and what was it that he had done again that made him slip back into his ignorant state? Was it something he said? Somehow, Harry didn’t think that it was the word ‘hungry’ or the phrase ‘how are you feeling’ that made Malfoy disappear again.

Was it something he did, then? A movement, a motion? Harry had petted Malfoy’s hair last night, but he doubted that was it. Still, he was willing to try – he wanted Malfoy back, as strange as it sounded. So he sat up on the couch as he had the night before and slowly placed his hand on Malfoy’s hair, smoothing it back. However, although it was a calming motion for Harry, it wasn’t doing anything to Malfoy. He was still in the same state as before.

A slap, maybe? Harry had slapped Malfoy lightly the day before.

“Sorry, Malfoy, but I’m going to have to slap you again,” Harry said and then wondered why he was excusing it. Back in school, he would have gladly slapped Malfoy if he had been able to do it without losing points or getting detention.

He raised his hand and brought it down on Malfoy’s cheek no harder than the day before. He wondered if it could really be called a slap – it was more of a hard pat, perhaps.

The slap didn’t, as Harry had already guessed it wouldn’t, work wonders. The only thing that did happen was Malfoy’s cheek turning slightly pink.

Harry groaned.

“Malfoy, for heaven’s sakes, just wake up,” he said but Malfoy appeared deaf and didn’t so much as blink at Harry’s words. “What did I do yesterday?” Harry asked out loud although there was no one to answer him. “Myra came. Should I bring her back to see if she has

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magical powers that wake you up? Somehow, I think not. Hermione? She will only give you a potion.”

He trailed off and stared at Malfoy.

“I forgot to give you the potion last night,” he said softly, “because Myra and ‘Mione came and we didn’t eat any dinner, we only had the scones. And then this morning I served you the potion with the milk...” He trailed off, just *knowing* that he was right.

But wouldn’t Hermione tell him if this was a possible side effect of the potion, though? She was well versed in most medical potions, Harry guessed, considering how much of a bookworm she had been back in school.

Perhaps it was a side effect that only happens when it’s distributed to part Veelas? Or maybe the potion wasn’t used very often – after all, how many magical folks had to get treatment for a broken spinal cord that hadn’t been treated with magical means immediately?

Harry’s mind supplied him with several suggestions, all of them quite likely. Hermione couldn’t have known.

Harry moved Malfoy around on the couch so that he wouldn’t get any more bedsores from the blankets rubbing at his skin all the time. It also kept him occupied, something for which he was grateful. Once he was done, he sat down in a chair at the table on the other side of the living room and turned on his laptop, fully meaning to *try* to write, as had been his intention with today all along.

Four hours later, he stepped away from the computer, where the cursor still blinked at the end of the same sentence as it had four hours earlier. He hadn’t been able to write so much as one word. It was like there was a block in his brain, hindering him from writing.

His stomach grumbled and with a look at the still comatose-like Malfoy, he stood and walked to the kitchen to prepare lunch. As he set the tray with Malfoy’s food, he was careful to leave the bottle with the potion alone. He fed Malfoy and then downed two plates of pasta salad himself.

When Harry had washed the dishes, he sat down on the couch with a book to read. He had some work for class that needed to be finished. Writing an essay for class went much easier than writing anything for his book; in little over an hour and a half, Harry had it finished on

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the living room table, books spread out everywhere. As soon as he was finished, he busied himself with reading a book he had to finish.

And then, at closer to four in the afternoon, there was that small sigh he'd been waiting for.

Dropping the pencil on the notebook he was writing in, he turned expectantly to Malfoy. He knew it would be another couple of minutes before Malfoy would wake up any more, if the wake-up-process proceeded as it had done the night before, but he stayed there on the couch, watching expectantly.

Just like the previous night, Malfoy blinked slowly, another sigh escaping his lips.

Harry beamed happily at him. "Welcome back, Malfoy," he said gently as Malfoy blinked again.

Malfoy's eyes moved almost lazily over to Harry's face. Malfoy blinked yet again, focusing on Harry's features. There was a small frown between his brows. Harry grinned at him, but Malfoy still didn't say a word. After a few minutes of silence, Harry sat back on the couch, a smile still playing at his lips.

It was going to be all right.

\*

Monday found Harry back at the university after a quiet morning at home. Malfoy was awake and aware, but still completely silent, watching Harry with something that could almost be described as interest but not quite. Yet Harry saw the difference in how he acted now versus how he had been for the last two weeks.

"You seem awfully happy," Myra noted as Harry met up with them before their first class started.

"Malfoy is getting better," Harry told her, still smiling.

"Malfoy? Who's Malfoy?" Darius asked, frowning at the two.

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Myra looked at Harry in a question of, 'Are you going to tell him? You better, or I will.' Harry shrugged and said to Darius, "I have a friend living at my apartment at the moment. His name is Draco Malfoy and he was in a motorbike accident almost six weeks ago. He's been living with me for the last two."

"Was he badly injured?" Darius asked.

"Yeah. He's paralysed from the waist down."

"That's awful," Darius said. "But he's getting better?"

"Yeah, I think so," Harry said, feeling relieved now that he'd told both his best friends. He still couldn't say why he had kept it from them, but it felt good that they knew now. Perhaps he was coming to terms with things after all – coming to terms with his old life at Hogwarts and how it ended and with Malfoy's sudden re-entrance into his life.

"And you've met him?" Darius was asking Myra.

Myra smiled slightly. "I went over there on Saturday and demanded to know what Harry was hiding."

"That somehow doesn't surprise me," Darius said. He turned to Harry. "Didn't I tell you that you shouldn't keep stuff from her?"

"You did, my friend," Harry grinned, "But you know me. I never listen."

"No, you most certainly do not. I never understood why – I always say such intelligent things."

Myra rolled her eyes at him. "If you said studied half as much time as you check out girls, then you *might* have been half way to intelligent."

Darius slapped his hands to his chest as though she'd hurt him. "You know, that wasn't good for my ego."

Myra grinned at him. "It wasn't supposed to be."

"Harry?" Darius asked. "Don't tell me that you agree with her."

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Harry grinned at him. “Always agree with the lady, D,” he said. “If nothing else, she’s got a great right hook after all that self-defence she’s been learning.”

“Huh. Yeah,” Darius said. Letting his eyes travel over Myra’s body, he said to Harry in a stage whisper, “D’you think she’d let me come watch when she practices? I’ve heard they have very small tops and low riding pants—”

Myra hit the back of his head.

“Ow, that hurt!” Darius whined.

“It was supposed to. Now come on, guys, it’s class-time,” Myra said, smiling at the uncomplicated banter that showed that things were back to normal between them. “Let’s go.”

“Why did I ever become friends with such a *horrible* person?” Darius asked in another stage whisper to Harry and another ‘ow’ followed.

\*

Harry walked past the coffee shop on the way back home and wondered if Malfoy liked coffee. Walking inside, he ordered a large latte for himself and opted for a normal, black coffee for Malfoy. Somehow Malfoy didn’t strike Harry as the kind of person to ‘spoil’ coffee by adding milk. He guessed that Malfoy was more of an espresso drinker – espresso was after all a very strong kind of coffee, a small amount and very tasty. He had a feeling that Malfoy viewed *caffè latte* as a way of destroying coffee. But espresso was a drink to intake at a *café*, not at home in a takeaway mug.

He was glad to find that Mona was not the one standing behind the counter.

Hurrying the few blocks home – he wanted the coffee to be warm when it reached Malfoy, after all – he walked into his apartment only a few minutes later. He found Malfoy on the couch where he had left him at lunch.

Malfoy could move slightly more now. He could raise his arms and move his head; within days, he would be able to wheel his wheelchair around by himself. It would be good for him – he hadn’t been outside since he came to live with Harry and before that, he had spent three weeks at the hospital. It was really time for him to get out.

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“Hello, Malfoy,” Harry said and sat down on the couch at Malfoy’s head. He helped Malfoy sit up and then handed him the cup. “I didn’t know what you like, so I took normal, black coffee. I hope that’s all right.”

Malfoy nodded and sipped the hot drink slowly. No emotions were apparent on his face, but Harry was getting used to that. Malfoy had never been one to show his emotions much, not even back at school, but even then, Harry had been able to tell when Malfoy was angry, irritated or blasé. Those three, with slight variations of course, were the only emotions Harry was ever allowed to see.

Harry stood and moved to his laptop. He was supposed to write on his book, but as he watched Malfoy, he found that the story he had been writing wasn’t interesting in the least. Instead, he opened a new document and started.

*“He was called ‘Dragon’ and with good reason. A beautiful outside – for dragons are most often pictured as beautiful after all – and a fiery inside that left you burnt if you weren’t careful...”*

Three hours later, a sound woke him from his intense writing session. The doorbell, he realised. He quickly saved the document he’d been working on and pushed print. He looked over on the couch, where Malfoy was sitting, reading one of the magazines that had been within his grasp. The empty takeaway mug stood on the table.

Harry walked down the corridor and opened the door, just as the doorbell rang again.

Mona stood outside.

“Er— hi?” she said shyly.

“Hi,” Harry said, looking at her with confusion. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I saw you at the café today and I wanted to talk to you, but you disappeared so quickly and I— I kind of followed you home,” she said very quietly and quickly, probably intending for Harry not to hear.

“You followed me home?” Harry repeated dumbly. “Why?”

“I told you, I wanted to talk to you,” she said, eyeing the floor with great interest.

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“About what?” Harry wasn’t sure what would be an intelligent question to ask a woman who had followed him home to find out where he lived. He sighed, wondering why he always attracted such strange people. “I guess you should come in,” he said.

A bright smile immediately appeared on her face. She quickly slipped into the apartment, as if worried that Harry would change his mind – he certainly was asking himself if he’d just made a huge mistake. Her eyes were wide with wonder as she took in every detail of the hallway. Harry couldn’t see what was so interesting, but she seemed to think that it was fascinating.

“This place is beautif—”

She broke off as she looked into the living room and spotted Malfoy. “Oh. Hi.”

Malfoy just looked at her, his grey eyes showing very little emotion. His eyes darted over to Harry, the question apparent in the grey orbs.

“Malfoy, this is Mona— what’s your last name?”

“D’Razi,” Mona said. She held out her hand to Malfoy. Malfoy didn’t raise his hand to meet, only watched her with cool detachment.

“He’s paralysed from the waist down and isn’t allowed to raise his arms because it could hurt his back,” Harry explained. It wasn’t the truth, because Malfoy could raise his hands a bit, but it wasn’t a complete lie either, since Hermione’s spell was still working.

“Oh,” Mona said again. She regarded Malfoy for another second before turning to continue her way through the apartment.

“Would you like anything to drink?” Harry asked, desperate for something to hold in his hands to keep from fidgeting. He felt Malfoy’s eyes on him, boring into him and making him even more uncomfortable.

“Sure, what do you have?” Mona looked delighted at being asked.

“Um, I think there is some soda and milk,” Harry said, frowning. “And water, of course.”

“Soda is fine. Do you have a Coke?”

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“Coming right up,” Harry said, relieved that he’d be able to get away for a few seconds, if for nothing else than to compose himself. “Malfoy, would you like anything?”

A small shake of the head, before the blond returned to the magazine in his hands, ignoring Mona completely.

When Harry returned, Mona stood by the computer where Harry had been working on until a few minutes ago. She was looking interestedly at what he had written. Harry stepped in front of her pointedly. She pretended not to notice, only took the glass of soda that he offered and continued her self-guided tour through the apartment. Harry was glad he had closed the door to his room; he definitely didn’t want her in there.

“This is a very nice apartment,” she said once they were back in the corridor, smiling coyly up at him.

Harry shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“No, really. Most guys don’t have any taste at all, but this place is decorated so nicely. Just like I pictured it,” she added and Harry wasn’t sure if the shyness in her voice was real or not.

“Thanks,” Harry said, not knowing what would be a good response.

An uncomfortable silence settled and Harry started fidgeting although he tried not to. “You know,” he said, “I’m kind of tired and –“

“Would you like to go out with me?” she interrupted him.

He fell silent. He’d expected the question, but at the same time he hadn’t. He’d hoped that she wasn’t as brave as to ask, because he had no idea what to say to it. Thus, his answer was an uncomfortable, “Um—”

“It doesn’t have to be a real *date* or anything,” Mona said quickly, pleadingly. “I’d just like to get to know you better, you know.”

Harry, who felt no attraction towards the young woman, squirmed mentally. “I’m not really –“

“Please?”

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Harry just barely stopped himself from sighing. Figuring that he could tell her no to a second date, or show her that he really wasn't interested in her *that way* during the date, he said, "Okay."

A wide smile spread on her face and her eyes began twinkling like Dumbledore's used to do. Harry was glad to be able to make her so happy, but uncomfortable with the way she was looking at him. She had the same adoration in her eyes that the Wizarding world at large had had before the war.

"Thursday?" she suggested.

Harry suppressed a sigh. "Thursday is fine. Where do we meet? I would pick you up, but I don't have a car."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Mona continued to smile. "We can meet at Espresso House and go from there. Say seven?"

"All right," Harry said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

"Great!" she said, then looked at her watch. "Oh," she said, "I need to go."

She picked through her purse and found a card and a pen. When she'd written her phone number on the card, she handed it to him. "If anything comes up or you'd just like to talk, you're welcome to just call me," she said with another smile and then, before Harry could respond, she was out the door.

Harry walked, quite stunned, back into the living room where Malfoy was still completely absorbed by the magazine in his hands. Harry would have liked it if Malfoy would talk to him, because he really needed to talk, but then he remembered that it was *Malfoy* before him, and he realised that it probably would have been mostly insults flying back and forth if they were to have a conversation.

He sighed and sat down by his computer again, but no matter how he tried, he couldn't concentrate enough to write anything. Giving up, he put the pages he'd printed earlier in his schoolbag for safekeeping and then he turned to Malfoy.

"Are you ready to go to bed?" Harry asked.

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Malfoy looked up from the magazine and nodded slowly. Harry walked over and lifted Malfoy from the couch. He was getting good at this. Too good, he realised. He could feel that Malfoy had gotten lighter since coming here – and considering how little he'd weighed to begin with, that was not a good thing. He didn't eat much, not even now that he was 'awake' again. He was frail and it wasn't good at all.

He walked into the bathroom and intended to help Malfoy with everything there, just as he had done for the last soon-to-be three weeks. But as he was about to unbutton Malfoy's pants for him, Malfoy gave him a scorching glare that was more alive than anything Harry had seen on Malfoy since the night he'd brought the blond to his apartment. He felt his face heat up at just where his hands were.

Touching another man like this – he would never have done it with anyone else. He had been attracted to guys before – hell, he'd been in love with Oliver Wood already back when he went to Hogwarts. Not that anything had ever happened; Harry hadn't realised that it was a crush he'd had on the Quidditch captain, only taken it for adoration of how well he played the sport, until after Oliver had left the school.

There had been others, but nothing big. The Boy Who Lived wasn't allowed a normal relationship, not with a girl – he cringed as he recalled the fiasco that was Cho Chang in fifth year – and *definitely* not with a boy. Harry's life had been far too occupied with the war for him to be able to have a deeper relationship with anyone.

Malfoy made a sound in the back of his throat, noticing the way Harry's thoughts had strayed. Harry's face turned an even deeper shade of red.

"Sorry," he muttered and made Malfoy sit down on the toilet seat. "Wait a sec'."

He returned less than a minute later with a chair. "That way you can sit and brush your teeth and all, and I think you're strong enough to move from the chair to the toilet by yourself."

Malfoy gave him another glare, the meaning clear as if he'd said it out loud – 'I'm fine. Leave.'

Harry held up his hands and backed out of the bathroom, walking back to his bedroom after the surreal experience instead. His thoughts drifted back to his attraction to men. He hadn't given it much thought, really. It was just there. Myra and Darius both knew and accepted it wholeheartedly. Ron and Hermione on the other hand had never known. Harry never had the chance to tell Ron...

## *The Depths of Winter*

It had been years and still the ache in his heart was almost as strong, though naturally not as sudden, as the night when they had found out.

It had been a dark night, cold January. There had still been snow on the ground – and Ron's red hair had contrasted in a horrific way with the white snow, his face contorted in fear and pain. There had been blood too, making it obvious that Ron hadn't died by the Killing Curse, but by something else, something slower, something much more painful.

*Hermione had broken down next to him, her eyes wide in shock, her body trembling violently. Harry turned away from her as she began throwing up.*

*Dean Thomas, standing as a statue on Harry's other side, the look on his face showing that his thoughts were far away. Harry knew that it wasn't Ron's body the other boy was seeing; he saw Seamus Finnigan, who had looked like this months earlier.*

*Both were dead.*

Harry shook his head. He didn't want to think about it, especially not at night right before going to bed. It would only serve to give him nightmares.

He remembered Malfoy, still in the bathroom and he got up from the bed. He knocked almost shyly on the door and asked politely, "Are you done?"

Malfoy used the same kind of sound at the back of his throat to answer this time. It didn't help – Harry didn't know if the sound was a 'yes' or a 'no', but he opened the door anyway. It seemed Malfoy was done.

Malfoy looked away, his cheeks tinged with pink as Harry lifted him and carried him to the bedroom.

When Malfoy was back on the bed, Harry said, "I know you don't like it, but you need help getting out of those pants. Will you let me help you?"

Harry felt the blush creep over his cheeks again. Malfoy watched Harry with his eyes narrowed, the cool grey eyes lacking the fire they had held just a few minutes before, the fire that Harry actually realised that he *missed*.

Finally, Malfoy nodded.

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Harry smiled inwardly, knowing that they had just managed to overcome something that could have become a huge problem. They were going to have to take it all slowly, because neither of them had done this before.

“I will call the hospital tomorrow,” Harry said as he began pulling Malfoy’s pants down. “I’ll see if we can get a meeting with one of the specialists. They’ll be able to put together a training program for you to get better.”

He lifted Malfoy carefully as he’d done for the last three weeks, getting him out of the pants. It had become much easier since the first time he did it. It was a matter of technique.

“You won’t be able to start doing it immediately, because ‘Mione’s spell is still on you, but then again I don’t think we’ll get to see a specialist immediately either,” he continued as he got Malfoy’s boxers off. “They are usually quite busy, I gather.”

Malfoy regarded him coolly as Harry undressed him. Harry could feel his gaze, boring through his skull and yet again, there was a blush rising in Harry’s cheeks. Quickly, he found the pyjama pants and got them on the blond.

Malfoy changed shirts almost by himself. He only needed help pulling it over his head since he couldn’t raise his arms that much, but Harry was glad to see something that Malfoy would definitely be able to do by himself once the spell wore off.

Finally, Malfoy lay down on the bed and Harry pulled the covers over him. He’d done it every night since Malfoy came to live with him, but tonight, Malfoy snatched the covers out of his hands and placed them over himself by his own accord. Harry allowed himself a small smile at this, before he left the bedroom to get ready for bed himself.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter eight*

### *Shopping*

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Tuesday morning, Harry awoke on the couch as usual. Yet again, he wondered why he hadn't bought another mattress to use on the floor at least – sleeping on the couch was all right for one night, not fourteen. He stretched and winced, slowly working out sore muscles before dressing himself. Jeans, a t-shirt and a sweatshirt on top of that; it would have to be enough. The weather looked cold and the skies were grey.

Harry fixed breakfast with familiar ease and loaded a tray with the same familiarity. He knocked on the door to his own bedroom – he had long since gotten over the sense of silliness that had hit him when he did it the first time – and walked inside a few moments later, despite the lack of an invite. He placed the tray on the bedside table and went to wake Malfoy up.

He found his hand in a death grip.

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “So we’re back to this, are we?”

Malfoy’s eyes slowly focused on Harry and the grip on his hand lessened as the blond recognized where he was.

“Potter.”

Malfoy’s voice sounded unused, unfamiliar.

“That’d be me,” Harry said. “Glad to see that we’re on speaking terms again.”

“What—” Malfoy broke off, frowning.

“What do you remember of the last two weeks?” Harry asked gently, sitting down on the floor next to the bed.

## *The Depths of Winter*

The frown deepened in concentration. “You took me here— and I got sick,” he said, voice still raspy after its long rest.

“You’ve been sort of out of it,” Harry said carefully. “You’ve been sick, sort of.”

Grey eyes searched green for truth. When Malfoy turned his gaze away, he seemed satisfied with the answer. The frown was still on his face; he was deep in thought.

Shifting his position to one where he was on his knees instead, Harry asked, “Hungry?”

Malfoy turned his head back to Harry. It looked like he’d forgotten that Harry was there at all. “I guess,” he said.

Harry looked over at the tray and then back at Malfoy, an idea forming in his head. “I know you’re used to breakfast in bed by now,” he said, “but would you like to come sit at the kitchen table instead to eat?”

Again, Malfoy’s eyes searched Harry’s for any untruth in the words, any trap, and again, the blond seemed satisfied with Harry’s honesty.

“All right.”

“I’ll have to carry you. Well, I could get the wheelchair, but I’ll still have to carry you over to the wheelchair and then wheel you to the kitchen and that is a trip over the doorframes and that might not be so comfortable.”

Harry shut up suddenly, realising that he was rambling and Malfoy was watching him as though he’d grown a second head.

“I guess I’ll just carry you.”

Malfoy still didn’t say a word, but Harry thought he could detect a slight blush as he picked him up. It was by no means a comfortable trip out to the kitchen and Harry tried to make it as quick as possible. He sat Malfoy down in one of the four chairs by the kitchen table and hurried back to the bedroom to get the tray containing Malfoy’s breakfast. He was running late for class.

“There, your breakfast,” Harry said as he set plate and glass before Malfoy.

## *The Depths of Winter*

He made toast and a glass of milk for himself, finishing it quickly. Malfoy ate slower, his body unused to moving at all. Harry watched him impatiently, tapping his fingers against the table as he waited for the blond to finish. The morning rituals took much, much longer when Malfoy ate by himself rather than just chew and swallow as Harry placed food into his mouth.

Finally, he sighed deeply.

Malfoy looked up from the plate, gazing at him questioningly but not saying a word.

“I’ll just call in sick today instead,” Harry said to him.

“Potter playing hooky?” Malfoy asked him, an eyebrow rising.

“Yeah, and it’s not the first time either,” Harry said. Abruptly changing the subject, he said, “You should drink some, it might help your voice. If it doesn’t, I’ll heat up some water for you with honey in. Mo—someone I knew used to do that.”

“Molly Weasley?”

It was just a name. Just a name, but it held so much; memories, feelings, experiences. When Harry and Ron became best friends, Molly Weasley became the mother Harry never had. She hugged him in a way that made him understand what a mother’s love was; she cared for him in a way that could sometimes get annoying, but mostly was just welcome.

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat, nodding to Malfoy but refusing to look at him. “Yeah.”

“She was a nice woman,” Malfoy said. “Hopefully, she still is.”

Molly had not died in the war, but she’d suffered more than most; she lost three children.

Harry’s head snapped up. “What happened to ‘with more children than they can afford?’” he asked and his voice came out haughtier than he’d intended.

“I grew up.”

Malfoy didn’t offer any further explanation, acting as though those three words were all that was needed. He continued to eat, slowly.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry watched him with curious fascination. He took in the blond hair, falling into the grey eyes every now and then as Malfoy bent his head forward to take a bite of the toast. The features were still like they had been in school, although older; Malfoy's face had always been pointy, the angles always sharp. He'd lost weight in the last six weeks. It showed on his face and on the way his clothes fit. Well, they were Harry's clothes, but when Malfoy had first arrived, they had fit better. Now they hung from his body.

"What happened to you, Malfoy?" Harry asked after what felt like an eternity of silence.

Malfoy looked up, grey eyes dull. "I seem to recall a motorbike accident," he said, attempting sarcasm but without any real feeling behind it.

Harry gave him a brief, annoyed glare. "You know I don't mean that."

"I do. But what makes you think I will tell you?"

Harry opened his mouth, but realised that he had no answer. He closed it again, then muttered, "Never mind."

The silence stretched over the kitchen again.

"Do you want some hot water and honey for your throat?" Harry asked.

Malfoy looked up and for the third time that morning, he seemed to be judging whether Harry was being honest or not. The gaze bore into Harry and he felt as though Malfoy was looking through him rather than at him. As he fought not to fidget under Malfoy's hard gaze, he wondered if there was anyone Malfoy trusted.

"Yes, please," Malfoy said finally.

Five minutes later, Harry set a cup with warm water and honey before Malfoy and the blond drank slowly. Harry leaned against the counter, wondering what he should be doing. Should he leave or stay or— In the end, he just stood there.

"Do you want to go out shopping today?" he asked finally, getting bored with the silence and tension between them. "You need some new clothes – mine don't fit you too well."

Malfoy looked down at himself and raised an eyebrow at the clothes. "Still no taste, I see, Potter."

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry wondered if he should roll his eyes or glare at Malfoy. He ended up doing neither, only snatched the now-empty cup from Malfoy's hands.

"Do you want to or not?"

Malfoy smirked at him, which made Harry want to smile in turn. That smirk was purely Malfoy and a sure sign that he was getting better by the second. "Sure, Potter, I'd love to go out shopping with you. Perhaps we can get some new clothes for you as well, hm?"

"There is nothing wrong with my wardrobe, thank you very much," Harry said.

"But you dress without your glasses on?"

"Hey!"

"And you are colour blind as well?" Malfoy continued on as though Harry hadn't said a word.

"Fine!" Harry exclaimed. "We'll buy me some new clothes as well. Satisfied?"

Again, Malfoy smirked. "Very."

As Harry grumbled beneath his breath about what sort of satisfaction Malfoy would get out of shopping clothes for him, Malfoy's smirk grew. Inside, Harry couldn't help but feel good about himself. He was, after all, the one who was making Malfoy feel better.

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"No, no, no, all wrong," Malfoy said, waving his hands about as much as Hermione's spell would allow.

"What's wrong with this?" Harry looked down at the clothes he was trying on – he couldn't see what was so bad about the clothes. The shirt was actually one he'd picked out.

"Ugh, that *colour*," Malfoy said, looking as though he was close to being sick "You cannot wear that colour."

## *The Depths of Winter*

“What’s wrong with this colour?” Harry decided it best not to tell Malfoy that he had several shirts at home in the same brownish colour that the shirt he was currently wearing was.

“Potter, that colour is called puce. There’s a *reason* why the name is so close to puke,” Malfoy said in his usual, superior tone.

Harry just rolled his eyes and went back inside to try on the next set of clothes that Malfoy had made him bring into the changing rooms.

So far, the shopping trip hadn’t been successful. Malfoy had tried on a few shirts, but quickly became tired as he had to squirm his way in and out of different sets. When Malfoy got tired, he got annoyed to the point of whiny, Harry soon noticed. So they had decided on a few t-shirts in various colours and soft materials to avoid rashes, as well as two pairs of pants that Malfoy hadn’t tried on at all but figured would fit and two sweatshirts that he’d pulled a face at as Harry paid for them.

Now, they had moved on to Harry.

Walking back out again, Malfoy frowned at him.

“The pants fit okay,” he said, his eyes raking over Harry’s body. Harry fidgeted under the steely gaze, not used to another person studying him so closely. The pants Malfoy was studying were also tight – *very* tight. Too tight, if you asked Harry, but obviously ‘okay’ in Malfoy’s eyes.

“Yeah, the pants are all right, but not the shirt,” Malfoy said, nodding as though he was agreeing with himself.

“Why not the shirt?” Harry said, getting frustrated with the amount of clothes he’d already tried on. His wardrobe was fine as it was!

“Not tight enough.” He smirked as Harry spluttered at him. “Go back and change. I think there are two more shirts for you to try. And take off that bloody key-chain around your neck. Why do you wear a key anyway?”

Harry didn’t answer, his mind barely registering the last question, as it was still in shock after Malfoy’s first comment.

It wasn’t tight enough.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Right.

An hour later, Malfoy was finally satisfied with Harry's new wardrobe and Harry was pushing him none-to-gently down the street. At least a dozen bags were hanging off the wheelchair in various places, some even situated on Malfoy's lap.

"I don't know why I ever let you talk me into this," Harry grumbled.

"Because you secretly enjoy modelling for me?" Malfoy suggested sweetly.

Harry rolled his eyes. Just then, they passed an ice cream parlour and Harry felt his sweet tooth. "Want to get some ice cream?" Harry asked, forgetting that he was supposed to still be angry with Malfoy.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow at him. "You want to have ice cream with your former archenemy?"

"Archenemy? You were never my archenemy," Harry said. "Annoying thorn in the side, perhaps. Vo—You-Know-Who was my archenemy."

It hurt, just to think the name. It reminded him of all the people that had died during his sixth and seventh year. Cedric and Sirius had only been the beginning, the first of many close to Harry that had died, and it hadn't ended until Harry committed murder and killed Voldemort.

Malfoy watched Harry with almost curious eyes, but when he opened his mouth and spoke, he only said, "I was only a thorn in your side? Hah. I made your life exciting."

Harry was glad that Malfoy let the subject of Voldemort and the war drop; on this admittedly grey and cold spring day, he didn't want to think about it. Not that there was any other day that he'd rather think about it, but still.

"So, ice cream?" he asked.

"Lead the way."

"Actually, I'll push the way."

## *The Depths of Winter*

Malfoy rolled his eyes at him, a not-quite smile on his lips. Harry didn't know why, but it felt good to banter back and forth with Malfoy again. It was easy-going; he didn't have to think. Perhaps that was what had been good with Malfoy from the moment he'd crashed back into Harry's life six weeks ago – Harry didn't think as much when he was with Malfoy. Only when they weren't together did Harry's mind run rampant, remembering voices and events of the past that he'd rather forget altogether.

Getting a wheelchair into the ice cream parlour wasn't as easy as Harry had thought. The doorframe was an inch high and just like in Harry's apartment, it was annoying to try to get over it. Then the space between the tables and chairs inside up to the disk was quite small and Harry bumped into two chairs on the way.

Finally reaching the desk, they ordered their ice cream, surprising each other by choosing almost the same – both wanted Rocky Road and vanilla/fudge. Harry chose a blueberry sorbet with it, Malfoy a citrus sorbet. Harry paid and they chose a window table where Harry could move the original chair out of the way and place Malfoy, before setting himself on the other side.

They ate in silence, but unlike during breakfast, the silence was quite comfortable.

When Harry had finished, Malfoy still had half his left. Although his wit was almost back to what Harry remembered it to be, his body was far from it. He was weak after the four hours they'd spent shopping and Harry wondered if it had been such a smart thing to do, to take Malfoy out of the house as soon as he got well again.

“Don't look at me like that, Potter,” Malfoy said to him.

“Like what?”

“Like you're trying to figure me out.” Malfoy looked at him, grey eyes unreadable.

“I'm not trying to figure you out,” Harry said, shrugging slightly. “I was wondering if you were tired.”

Malfoy seemed to debate with himself whether he would admit his weakness to Harry or not. Finally he nodded, eyes downcast.

“You should be, if it's any consolation,” Harry said. “Heck, *I'm* tired and I'm used to walking. You haven't been—“

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He broke off, realising just why Malfoy was having such a hard time admitting that he was tired.

“—walking,” he finished finally.

“Thank you, Potter,” Malfoy said coolly, “for that observation.”

Harry didn't know what to say. Malfoy's posture, eyes and words seemed cold, shut off. He refused to meet Harry's eyes; instead he stared at a point just beyond Harry. It reminded Harry a bit too much of the way Malfoy had been for two weeks, the coma-like state he'd been in, and an urge to slap the blond back to his senses came over him. It was pure will that he didn't do it. Instead he simply said, “Let's go home.”

Malfoy didn't reply, only sat stone-faced as Harry pushed the wheelchair with Malfoy in it out of the crowded little ice cream parlour, bumping into only one chair in the process.

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The trip home was silent and Malfoy accepted his fate wordlessly, his face completely blank, as Harry carried him up the stairs to the apartment and placed him on the couch to go down and get the wheelchair.

Starting on some afternoon scones to go with a cup of tea, Harry sighed deeply. He'd thought that they'd been making some progress. Their bantering during the day as Harry tried on numerous clothing items had been almost back to the level they'd been at in school, only friendlier. Now, Malfoy sat on the couch with a magazine in his lap, ignoring Harry and the world in favour of the latest gossip. Harry was quite certain that Malfoy wasn't even reading.

He placed the un-baked scones in the small oven to finish and put some water on. Tea tended to calm his nerves.

Perhaps he should start calling the other man by his first name? It might be a step in the right direction. Not that Harry was at all sure of what was the 'right direction', but since they were living under the same roof – Harry's mind had barely suggested telling Malfoy to move out before the idea was discarded – becoming friends, or at least *civil* to each other seemed like a good thing.

## *The Depths of Winter*

He poured the hot water into two mugs and placed a tea bag in his own, placing both mugs and an assortment of tea-sorts on a tray and carried it out. He placed it on the low glass table in the living room and said to Malfoy,

“I don’t know what sort of tea you like, so I brought several.”

Malfoy looked up from the magazines, turning his head as much as Hermione’s spell would allow him, to face Harry. His eyes were cool, distant, his face emotionless. After several long moments, he stretched over and picked up one of the tea bags and put it in the mug.

“Thank you,” he said. Harry wished he’d been better at catching the emotions in Malfoy’s voice, because he was sure that there *was* emotion.

“I’m making scones as well,” Harry said, needing to fill the silence. “They’ll be done in a few minutes.”

Malfoy frowned as though remembering something, but then his face cleared and he went back to his magazine. Harry sighed softly and sat down on the other end of the couch, teacup in his hands.

“You know, you could talk to me,” he said finally, quietly.

Malfoy’s gaze didn’t waver from the magazine, but Harry was sure that he had the blond man’s attention.

“About what you’re feeling, I mean,” Harry continued, watching Malfoy closely. “Yeah, I know, we’re guys; we’re not supposed to talk about feelings. But you have to feel *something* about—“

“About what, Potter?” Malfoy asked, head snapping up to look at him but the spell refusing to let him do so. Angry frustration was clearly written on Malfoy’s face as he fought to be able to turn around to look at Harry. When he’d finally managed to move himself around enough, his eyes were blazing, something close to hatred directed towards Harry. Harry hadn’t seen such fire in those eyes since the accident.

“About that,” Harry said, motioning towards Malfoy’s legs. He wondered if it were a mistake to aggravate Malfoy so; angering a dragon was never a good thing to do. ‘*Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus*’ and all that. Then again, Malfoy wasn’t sleeping.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“What do you want me to do, Potter?” Malfoy spat at him. “Break down and cry so that you can pat me on the back and tell me that it’s ‘going to get better’? It’s not going to get any fucking better!”

“You don’t know that,” Harry said, letting his own anger flare within. To get a response out of Malfoy was what he’d wanted and it meant that Harry himself had to react. “There is training and workouts that you can do and you’ll get—“

“Don’t you dare say those words,” Malfoy warned. “I do not want to hear them.”

“But you’re not even *trying* to get better!” Both their voices were raised now.

“What the hell can I do? With this fucking spell on me, I can’t even turn to look at you! I can’t practice, train, do workouts, all those pretty little ideas you have in your head! I’m not one of your damsels in distress and you won’t be able to save me.”

Malfoy’s chest was heaving by the end of it and angry red spots had appeared on his cheeks.

Harry looked down at the floor before meeting stormy grey eyes again. “I never thought of you as a ‘damsel in distress’, Draco,” he said, voice steady and the use of Malfoy’s first name deliberate. He allowed a smile to ghost over his lips as he continued. “But you needed to get that out of your system.”

Malfoy stared at him, grey eyes still stormy, angry – lost. They looked at each other for several long moments, before, surprisingly, Malfoy turned away. He put the cup of tea on the table, his breathing still slightly faster than normal. Then he sat back on the couch, the magazine still on his lap but long since forgotten.

The beeper on the oven sounded and Harry took the tray with him as he left the living room to collect the newly baked scones. He loaded the tray with scones and butter, wondering if he should make another cup of tea for himself. He did.

When he returned to the living room nearly ten minutes later, he found Malfoy with his face turned towards the back of the couch, fast asleep.

Harry smiled softly, almost tenderly, at the blond and returned to the kitchen to read and eat.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter nine Developments*

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The next day, Harry woke up on the couch as he'd done every day since Malfoy came to live with him. Outside, it was raining, the grey clouds of the day before still covering the skies. The morning rituals proceeded as usual – until Harry came to the point where he had to get dressed.

The new clothes that Malfoy had picked out for him the day before were still in their bags by the door, since Harry had just unceremoniously dumped them there the previous afternoon to be unpacked later. Now he took an uncertain step towards them, as though they'd bite. He took the many bags with him back into the living room, where he went through the contents.

Malfoy had certainly been thorough. And Malfoy certainly had a sense of fashion; Harry had to admit to that. For being half-gay, Harry most certainly did *not* have a fashion sense of any kind.

Myra had once told him he must be the only gay guy in history to have no fashion sense.

Harry grinned to himself as he wondered if he would be able to mismatch even these clothes.

Finally, he decided on the new pair of jeans that Malfoy had, at long last, been satisfied with – Harry didn't want to know how many pairs he'd tried on – and a black t-shirt that was impossibly tight. Harry looked uncertainly at a silver necklace that Malfoy had bought as well, but then shrugged and put it on. They hadn't gotten as far as shoes, because by that time Harry had noticed how tired Malfoy seemed, but there were new socks. Harry wondered what was wrong with his old socks, but didn't think he'd dare to ask.

He finished breakfast and thought that perhaps he could let Malfoy sleep this morning. Since Malfoy was 'back to normal' again, it seemed unnecessary to wake him up. Harry would be home by eleven again anyway; Malfoy could get his breakfast then. Or perhaps the blond would have made breakfast by himself, although Harry doubted it since he still was far from free to move around.

## *The Depths of Winter*

He walked to class, enjoying the walk despite the weather. Arriving at the university, Harry saw Myra and Darius talking to each other.

“Hey guys,” he said, coming up to them.

“Hey Har— bloody hell,” Myra swore, staring at him with wide eyes.

“Um, Myra? D?” Harry asked uncertainly as his two friends openly goggled at him.

“What *are* you wearing?” Darius asked finally.

“Uh, new clothes, Malfoy picked them out for me,” Harry said. “They’re kind of uncomfortable.”

“You look— you look—” Myra said, her ability to talk seeming to momentarily escape her.

“I think she’s trying to say that you look gorgeous, Harr’,” Darius said, grinning at both Harry and Myra. “And might I say, well done – I’ve never seen our dear Myra speechless before.”

“Gorgeous?” Harry repeated dumbly.

“Of course,” Darius said. “Those clothes— I think that I will have to go out shopping with that Malfoy of yours as well.”

“They’re good, then?” Harry still wasn’t sure that the clothes were all that wonderful – they were too tight and definitely not his style.

“They’re—” Myra began, but then lost her ability to talk again and continued to just stare.

“C’mon,” Darius said, taking Myra by the elbow and slapping Harry on the back. “Let’s get to class so that she can get something else to think about.”

Throughout the day, people kept staring at Harry as though he was a never-before-seen specimen and he couldn’t understand why. Darius and Myra – once she got her tongue back – told him that the new clothes he wore really looked good.

“Better than good,” Myra said, still in slight shock. “That Malfoy of yours should get a medal for dragging you out to shop.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry was glad to come home during lunch, to escape the staring and the sudden bouts of giggling that escaped from young women around him on the university's grounds. He unlocked the door to the apartment and walked inside. He was surprised by the delicious smell of cookies in the air.

"Mal— Draco?" Taking his shoes off and putting the wet umbrella away, he walked into the apartment. He found the man he was looking for in the kitchen.

Malfoy was sitting in his wheelchair by the table, reading a magazine. On the kitchen counter, there was a plate of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.

"Draco?"

Malfoy looked up from his magazine, startled. He obviously hadn't heard Harry the first time.

"Hi," Harry tried, having no idea where their relationship currently was, considering the previous day's fight.

Malfoy had to turn the wheelchair around to be able to look at him in the eye. Harry wondered how he'd been able to bake with the spell still on his back. Malfoy didn't say anything; only regarded him with dull grey eyes.

"Can I take one?" Harry gestured towards the cookies.

"They were made for eating," Malfoy said.

Harry took a cookie and broke off a piece. "They're good," he said. "I didn't know you could bake."

Malfoy gave him a look that said, 'There are a lot of things you don't know about me.' Harry felt himself blush; of course there were things, probably a million of them, that he didn't know about the blond man.

"So," Harry began once the silence became too much. "How— how are you feeling?"

As happened so often when he was with Malfoy, he was once again subjected to the scrutinizing silver gaze that seemed to look through him.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Better,” Malfoy said finally, with little emotion to his voice. Swiftly changing the subject, he asked, “Did your friends like your new clothes?”

Harry broke out in a grin. “You should have seen Myra – she was completely speechless when she first saw me. I couldn’t understand it, but D told me it was the clothes.”

“You look good,” Malfoy said. “Courtesy of me, of course.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t see what was wrong with my old clothes.”

“Everything?”

“Jeez, thanks,” Harry said, rolling his eyes and taking another cookie off the plate. They really were very good.

“How long will you be home?”

Harry was surprised by the question; so far Malfoy hadn’t spoken unless Harry had asked him something first.

“You mean for lunch?” Malfoy nodded. “Till two thirty. My next class starts at three. Hey, do you want to get out for a bit of food?”

A slight crease appeared between Malfoy’s brows as he considered it. A second later, he gave a small nod. “Sure. Be nice to get out.”

“I’m sure,” Harry said. “It can’t be fun to be cooped up in here all day long.”

Malfoy didn’t reply and Harry wondered if he’d taken the subject too far again. He had no idea where the line went for what was too deep a discussion about Malfoy’s ‘problem’ and what was acceptable.

Malfoy went to get himself out of the wheelchair and over to one of the kitchen chairs, so that Harry, just like yesterday, first could take the wheelchair down to the first floor and then come back up for the blond. Malfoy’s getting out of the wheelchair, however, seemed to Harry like a slow and painful process as the spell on his back fought against his moving much at all. Again, Harry marvelled at the fact that he’d made the cookies all by himself in a kitchen that was in no way made for a wheelchair.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Let me help you.” It was not a question; it was a statement. Harry turned the wheelchair around and lifted Malfoy swiftly over to the chair. As he did every time he carried the blond in any way, he worried about how little Malfoy weighed.

Malfoy didn’t say a word as Harry quickly folded the wheelchair together so that he could carry it down the narrow staircases of the apartment building, nor did he say a word as Harry carried him down those same staircases. The pale face no longer looked humiliated as he had the first time Harry had had to carry him up to the apartment; now Malfoy seemed resigned to his fate, his face blank. Harry wondered if it was just a façade.

It wasn’t raining as much as it had when Harry was walking home from the university, thankfully, but Malfoy got to hold the umbrella. Harry didn’t mind the rain so much; he had good, waterproof boots and a green raincoat that Malfoy had made a disgusted face at when Harry had taken it out of his wardrobe.

“*Why*,” he’d asked, “is everything you own some off-version of green or yellow?”

Harry had shrugged. “’twas cheap, I guess.”

Malfoy had just stared at him, as though it were impossible to choose clothes on such a thing as *price*.

“Is there anything in particular that you would like to eat today?”

“Anything that isn’t your cooking,” Malfoy replied.

“Hey! There’s nothing wrong with my cooking,” Harry said, quite offended. His cooking was actually something he took pride in, which was why he had such a well-organized kitchen and a well-filled fridge.

“No,” Malfoy said, his voice quiet, “but I haven’t had anything else for the last three weeks and before that, I had only hospital food – what little of it I ate.”

There was no self-pity in Malfoy’s words; only tired facts.

“Oh,” was all Harry could say. After a few minutes, he asked, “Is pasta okay? I know this great pasta place.”

“Pasta is fine,” Malfoy said, still sounding worn out.

## *The Depths of Winter*

It was a small Italian restaurant that served freshly made pasta and also very good pizzas. For today, though, both young men opted for pasta; Harry with four kinds of cheese on it and Malfoy pasta with shrimp sauce. The only problem they had with the restaurant was to get inside; it had two small steps to get into the building, which took them a few minutes.

Harry observed Malfoy as they both ate. Malfoy's eating was a bit sloppy, as he was unable to bend over the table as he ate, but Harry still found himself admiring the other man. There was a quiet strength and a strong will surrounding him. Harry wondered if his thoughts on Malfoy not wanting to get better were unfounded after all.

"Any good?" Harry asked after a few minutes of silence.

Malfoy looked up to find Harry watching him intently. "The pasta is delicious," he said after a few moments.

Harry gave him a small smile. "Thought you'd like it."

"Why are you doing this?"

The question caught Harry unprepared. Not that he would have known what to answer even if he had been prepared, but still.

"What do you mean?" he asked, frowning at Malfoy.

"This," Malfoy said, motioning at the restaurant. "Letting me stay with you, taking me out to lunch, buying me new clothes – being nice to me."

Harry's frown deepened. "Would you rather I didn't?" When Malfoy didn't reply, Harry continued, "I – I don't know why I'm doing it. I don't know why I've done any of the things I've done in the last six weeks. I have no clue why I went back to the hospital after the first time, or the second or the third. Or why I helped you, why you got sick or why I let you come stay with me." Harry was talking faster and faster, but suddenly stopped. "I guess that somewhere along the way I started to care."

The grey eyes never left Harry as he spoke; Harry could feel them watching even as he refused to meet them.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“You care?” Malfoy said finally and there was a hint of some emotion in his voice that Harry couldn’t place.

Harry looked up, forcing himself to meet the other man’s gaze. “I guess I do.”

“Why?” A simple question and no answer.

“I just told you; I don’t know.”

Silence fell again, since neither man knew what to say. There was too much history between them to just forget, but at the same time, that history was years ago.

“Do you think we could ever be friends?” Malfoy asked. He suddenly seemed timid.

“If we want to,” Harry said, “I think we can.”

“Do we want to?”

Harry looked down at his plate, studying it intently. Then he looked up again and said simply, “Yes, we do.”

He smiled slightly and saw Malfoy do the same, the small smile making the tired lines on his face less pronounced. Suddenly, the tension that had been between them lessened and their minds were no longer as serious and troubled.

“Does this mean we should start calling each other by our first names?” Harry asked.

“I thought you’d already started doing that,” Malfoy said. “Without my permission, might I add.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, *Mister Malfoy*, I didn’t know I needed your permission,” Harry said, voice sarcastic but happy.

Another small grin passed over Malfoy’s lips. “You have my permission now.”

“And you may call me ‘Harry’,” Harry said, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, because ‘Potter’ doesn’t really do any good, does it? Seeing how your last name is ‘Evans’ now and all,” Malf— *Draco* said.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry sobered at the mention of his taken last name. “That’s none of your business.”

Draco regarded him for a few moments before shrugging. “No, I guess not.”

The waitress arrived just then and asked them if they were finished. Harry nodded, casting a slightly worried look at Mal— Draco’s plate. The blond had eaten less than half of what was on the plate. When the waitress had left, he said, “You need to eat more.”

“Is this part of the friend-package?” Draco asked, frowning at him. “Cause I don’t care much for it.”

“And I don’t care if you don’t care,” said Harry. “You need to eat; you’re losing too much weight.”

“Look, *Potter*,” Draco said, pointedly using his last name, “if I eat any more I’ll be sick – is that better?”

“Of course not but—“

“Then leave it alone,” Draco said.

“Fine,” Harry said sullenly, “are you ready to go, then?”

“Might help if you paid the bill before we leave,” Draco said, raising an eyebrow at Harry.

Harry felt his cheeks go slightly red. He called upon the waitress and then, once he’d paid for the food, he stood and snapped, “Ready to go now?”

Draco just smiled angelically at him, although his eyes were teasing. Harry found his bad mood fading; he didn’t know why he’d gotten so irritated to begin with. Seeing Draco happier again was more pleasing to him than he would have thought.

Finally, Harry rolled his eyes at the blond and they left the restaurant.

When they arrived back home again after a quiet-but-not-uncomfortably-so walk, they went through the process of going up to the apartment again.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“This is getting quite annoying,” Harry huffed as he took the wheelchair into the apartment and placed it next to the couch where Draco was currently sitting.

Draco looked at him, face blank but eyes still filled with emotions. “Sorry to be such a bother,” he said quietly.

Harry frowned at him. “You’re not.”

“You just said ‘this is getting quite annoying’ – wouldn’t that mean it is a bother? That *I* am a bother?” Harry couldn’t place the look in Draco’s eyes.

“I didn’t mean that *you* are a bother,” Harry said. “I meant that the wheelchair and the stairs are a bother.”

Again, Draco was silent for several long moments, looking down at his hands so that Harry couldn’t read his eyes, but then again, Harry didn’t need to read the blond man’s eyes; he had only to look at his posture to know that he’d said something wrong again.

“The wheelchair is me,” Draco said, looking up again, sadness in his eyes and at once, Harry understood.

With a small, gentle smile, he sat down on the couch by Draco’s feet. “No, it’s not,” he said. “It is—“

“It *is* me,” Draco insisted, looking down at his hands.

“No, listen to me, Draco,” Harry said. “It’s not. The wheelchair is *part* of what you are now, but it will never be *everything* you are – it will never even come close to all that you are.”

“How do you know what I am?” Draco asked haughtily.

“Well, you have lived here for three weeks—“

“And I was basically unconscious most of that time.”

“—and in the last two days you have showed that you are moody and—“

“Not really making me feel better,” Draco muttered.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“—and sarcastic and with ‘an excellent taste in clothes’ as Myra put it, you can bake the yummiest cookies, you are witty and you’re strong,” Harry finished as though Draco hadn’t spoken at all.

Draco stared at him. After a moment, he seemed to realise what he’d been doing and he asked, “Are you sure you’re the Harry Potter I knew in school?”

Harry gave him a small smile. “Unfortunately, yes.”

Draco hesitated again. “And you just gave me not one but *several* compliments?”

Harry blushed, although he didn’t know why, and then shrugged. “Guess so.”

“Hm,” Draco said, cocking his head to the side as much as the spell would allow him – which admittedly wasn’t much. “That’s interesting.”

“Why is it interesting? And what exactly is it that is interesting?” Harry asked confusedly.

“You. You’re interesting.” He didn’t continue; it seemed a habit for the blond not to actually explain things, which made it hard for Harry, since he was, according to Myra, ‘a bit thick at times’.

“Oh,” he said, mostly just to say something. Then he wanted to bang his head on the wall, wondering if that was really the *only* thing he could come up with to say. He glanced down at his clock and was shocked to see that it was already two thirty-five. “Oh, I’ve got to go,” he said, standing up.

Draco looked up at him, but didn’t say anything.

“Do you want anything before I leave?” Harry asked. “Something to drink, eat, read?”

“Nah, I’ll get it myself if I need anything.” He paused. “Well, actually, do you have anything good to read? I’ve read your magazines several times by now and reading about Britney Spears and Cameron Diaz’ boyfriends can only hold my interest for so long.”

“Well, actually—” Harry hesitated, remembering the books he had underneath his bed – books on paralysis. Of course he had novels of different kinds as well, but it might be a good idea for Draco to read about his condition.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Well actually? What does that mean?” Draco frowned at him.

“I have a few books on paralysis in my room,” Harry said. “If you’d like to read them. I mean, I have other books as well, I just...” He trailed off, looking uncertainly at Draco.

“You think it might be a good idea for me to read those books,” Draco said. Looking down and then back up at Harry, he said with a small shrug, “I guess it couldn’t hurt. Might be something interesting.”

Harry offered a small smile and went to get the books. When he returned, Draco stared at him and the handful of books he carried. “You really researched this, didn’t you?”

“I thought it—I don’t know. I bought them when you were still in the hospital.”

Draco nodded, fingering one of the books uncertainly. The he looked at Harry. “You should go. Your class starts in a minute.”

Harry looked at his watch and swore. “Shit! Okay, I’ll see you later. Bye.”

He flashed a smile at Draco and was gone in a flurry. Draco closed his eyes, listening to the sound of the door closing and being locked. Uncertainly, he picked up the first book and began reading.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter ten*

### *Discussions*

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That night, Harry sat by the computer again, letting his fingers fly over the keys as he typed. He felt bad; he wasn't working on his book, but rather on the new story that he'd started two days earlier. He wasn't quite sure where the story was going yet, but it didn't matter; his fingers seemed to know well enough.

"What is it you are writing so furiously?"

Harry jumped, startled. He turned to Draco. "Story," he said simply.

"What about?"

"Um— it's about— it's kind of hard to explain," Harry said, blushing.

"Try?" Draco suggested.

"I'd really rather not," Harry said.

Draco frowned at him then his expression turned cool. "All right, whatever. I don't care. I just thought it'd be polite to seem interested. You are a published author after all."

"You know that?" Harry was surprised.

"Didn't know it till I met you again and found out that you're Harry *Evans*, but yeah, I've seen your books." Draco's tone was still cool.

Harry smiled slightly at him, hoping to get Draco back into friendly-mode, as he'd been before. He just didn't want Draco to find out what he was writing about. That would be embarrassing.

Just as Harry opened his mouth to speak again, the doorbell rang. Harry stood up and walked to the door.

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“Hermione!” he said, surprised and happy to see her.

“Hello, Harry. Ooh, nice clothes,” she said, eyeing Harry. Harry blushed and motioned for her to follow him into the apartment once she was done hanging up her jacket. After getting her shoes off, she hugged him. “How are you?”

“Good,” Harry said, “and you?”

“Oh, you know,” she smiled, “busy as always. Lots to do at St Mungo’s and with classes.”

“Well, as far as I can remember, you like it that way. Busy, I mean,” Harry said as they walked into the apartment.

“I do,” she said.

“Oh, and I have good news for you,” Harry said.

“Is that so?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah. Draco is better again.” He led her into the living room and gestured towards Draco.

A look of shock or surprise passed over her face before it settled into a happy smile. “Hello, Malfoy.”

“Granger,” Draco greeted the young woman levelly.

“You look much better than the last time I saw you.” She turned to Harry. “What was wrong with him?”

“Well,” Harry said. “It seems like it was the potion that made him that way. I forgot to give it to him one night – actually, it was the last time you were here – and he woke up. Then the next morning, he was okay, but after breakfast he zoned out again, so I figured that it was the potion. Did you know it could have such side-effects?”

Hermione looked thoughtful. “There has been a case like it before, but the potion is used quite often, although in smaller doses, as a pain reliever, and usually the taker doesn’t experience any problems at all. I’m sorry that it happened – I should have checked more carefully before giving it to you.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“No worries, ‘Mione,” Harry said happily. “We figured it out, didn’t we? And he’s okay now.”

“Okay and would appreciate it if you didn’t talk as though he wasn’t here,” Draco muttered.

“—just as grouchy as before,” Harry added with a small smile. “Would you like anything to drink, ‘Mione?”

“Do you have any coffee?”

“I can put some on if you’d like it,” Harry said.

“Oh, that’s not—“

“It’s not a problem at all,” Harry assured her. “Draco, would you like some coffee? I rather feel like some myself.”

Draco gave a small shrug. “I can take a cuppa.”

“Well, then, ‘Mione, you just sit down and I’ll be back in a minute,” Harry said and left the living room to prepare the coffee.

When Harry came back, with three cups of coffee, sugar and milk on a tray, he was met by an uneasy silence. He rolled his eyes mentally and asked himself if the two would ever put aside their differences from school.

“There you go,” he said and handing Hermione her cup and then giving Draco his.

The uneasy silence settled again, before Harry asked, “So, ‘Mione, how’s the science going?”

She smiled at him. “Oh, it’s so much fun,” she said. “We get to do all sorts of experiments, to see how different substances react with each other. Nothing dangerous, of course, but it’s very interesting. It reminds me of Potions, sometimes.”

“Yeah, because Potions was so much fun,” Harry said sarcastically.

“Potions is a very interesting subject,” Draco said, getting into the discussion as well.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Yeah, but I always did have a hard time learning when my Professor wouldn’t leave me alone for five minutes and would deduct points for my *breathing*,” Harry said.

“On the other hand, you had the Headmaster on your side,” Draco said.

“Professor Dumbledore was on everyone’s side!” Harry said.

“Oh, yes,” Draco said sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

“He was fair, which is a lot more than I can say about Professor Snape,” Harry said.

“Fair? Oh yes, so *fair*.” Draco paused, glaring at him. “Want an excellent example of just how much he played by favourites? First year, when Slytherin had *honestly* won the House Cup. But no, he didn’t think Slytherin should win it, so he awarded Gryffindor a few ‘last-minute-points’ so that you got it instead. And for some reason, it was *just enough* to beat Slytherin.”

“We earned that,” Harry said. “We—“

“—fought Voldemort? Yes,” Draco said, “you did have an uncanny habit of doing that at the end of every year, didn’t you? Even managed to get the last, final battle to happen at the end of your seventh year – that is some good planning. Either way, Dumbledore could have given those points to you much earlier in the first year, several days – not at the feast, after the decorations were set and we’d found out we had won the Cup.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something but shut it again because he couldn’t really argue with Draco’s point. He glared at Draco and finally said, “Well, one event is not enough to call it favouring.”

“Oh, come off it, Potter,” Draco said. “You know just as well as I do that Dumbledore far preferred Gryffindors over any other House, although it wasn’t as pronounced when it came to Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, since they never stood out in anything anyway.”

Deep down, Harry knew him to be right – he’d known already back at school. Fighting about what Dumbledore had thought about the different Houses was just a way for them to discuss school without discussing any more serious subjects.

As the two men glared at each other, Hermione looked from one to the other. “Um, guys?”

At the sound of someone else’s voice, they both snapped out of it.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Sorry, ‘Mione,” Harry said sheepishly. Draco stayed silent, watching the two former best friends. Harry continued, “So, you were saying about your studying...?”

“Before you two started off, you mean?” she said with a smile at him. “You two are just like in school.”

A brief frown passed over Harry’s face, before he shrugged. “It was just a discussion.”

“Yeah, and one where you couldn’t agree – that sounds to me like it did in school,” Hermione said. “Either way, tell me a bit about what’s going on with you instead. School is not that much fun to talk about.”

“Well,” Harry said, “in that case my what’s-going-on-right-now isn’t all that much fun either, because it’s mostly just classes. That and Draco and he can answer for himself.”

“I guess he can,” Hermione said, looking over at Draco. “Is the spell still in place?”

“Yes,” Draco said, his voice cool and businesslike. “It’s releasing its hold a bit more every day, but it’s in place.”

Hermione gave him a curt nod. “It should stay on another few days; your back will be as healed as it will ever be after that.”

“He’s doing really well,” Harry said, smiling. “He baked cookies yesterday. Actually, I think there are some left, if you would like something to go with the coffee.”

“Well, the coffee is almost gone, but I’ll take cookies any day,” she said.

“Would you like more coffee?” At her nod, Harry turned to Draco and he nodded as well. A few minutes later, Harry was back with a plate with cookies and more coffee.

“So, Harry,” Hermione said, “you really don’t have anything interesting going on in your life? Or *anyone*?”

Harry felt his cheeks heat up at her words and he wondered why he was blushing at such an innocent question.

Draco snorted at him. “Potter’s got a hot *date* tomorrow.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Oh, Harry, that’s wonderful!” Hermione said, sounding absolutely delighted. Harry couldn’t understand why she cared so much. “Who is she?”

Again, Draco answered. “A *fan* of his. A little young thing that followed him home one night just to find out where he lived, so that she could ask him out.”

“A fan?” Hermione asked curiously.

Harry shrugged, his blush deepening and a hate towards Draco growing. “She’s just— she’s read my books, apparently, and I’m going out with her tomorrow night and she’ll see that I’m not interested.”

“Not interested? Why not?”

Another shrug. Harry did *not* want to get into the subject of his sexual preferences right now, especially not in front of Draco. It would be humiliating beyond repair. He also didn’t want to try explaining to Hermione just how uncomfortable Mona made him feel. “She’s just not my type.”

“Oh, just give her a chance!” Hermione said.

“Yes, Harry, just give her a chance!” Draco mimicked in a high-pitched voice, earning a burning glare from Hermione.

Harry stood, throwing his hands up. “I’m going out with her tomorrow, isn’t that enough? How much more of a chance can I give her?”

“Just have fun, Harry,” Hermione said, taking his hand and pulling him down to sit again. “That’s all I want. But tell me a bit about her – what’s her name? How old is she? What does she look like?”

“Um—” Harry said. “Dark hair. About this tall, I think—“ he held out his hand to show “—and her name is Mona D’Razi. I don’t know how old she is, but I think she’s about eighteen or so.”

“D’Razi? An unusual name,” Hermione said.

“I guess.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“But really, Harry, you’re going out with her and you barely remember how she looks.” At his helpless shrug, she added, “Well, just have a fun night, even if it doesn’t turn into anything else.”

Harry nodded and gave her a small smile, before quickly changing the subject to something safer. They spent a half hour doing small talk, mostly Hermione and Harry talking. Nothing heavy; no subjects that touched the past any more than the discussion Harry and Draco had. It was just a relaxing conversation between old friends.

Finally, Hermione stood. “I guess it’s time for me to go,” she said. “Although, I do need to use the bathroom...?”

Harry pointed where she would find it and she took her handbag and disappeared. Harry eyed Draco. “You’re turning into a coffee-oholic.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Harry grinned at him. “I’ll have to take you to Espresso House some time.”

“That’s where you got the takeaway, right? Good stuff. But I prefer an espresso. Single, with a bit of dark chocolate to go with it.”

Harry continued to smile. “s what I thought you’d prefer, actually.”

Draco looked horrified at being predictable. “You are not supposed to be able to figure such things out about me just by – by being with me!”

Harry chuckled. “You’d be surprised at the amount of things I’ve figured out by just watching you, Malfoy.”

Before he had time to elaborate, Hermione returned. “This is truly a lovely apartment, Harry,” she said. “Although I was wondering – where do you sleep? I hope you don’t mind – I peeked into your room, and there is only the one bed.” Suddenly she blushed. “You don’t— I mean— You’re not—”

Suddenly Harry caught onto what she was thinking and he blushed as well. “No, no, we’re not— we’re most *definitely not*— sharing a bed,” he quickly assured her. “I sleep on the couch.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Draco was having a hard time suppressing his laughter at Harry's blushing, Harry noticed, and he quickly stood to follow Hermione out. As soon as the door had closed behind her, he heard Draco explode into a fit of laughter.

"We're not— we're most *definitely not*— sharing a bed," Draco imitated between fits of giggles.

"Not funny," Harry said sourly.

"Oh, yes, Potter, very funny," Draco said, his laugh growing at Harry's pout.

"You know, I could let you sleep on the couch one night," Harry said, eyes narrowing.

Draco quickly sobered. "You wouldn't."

Harry raised an eyebrow at him.

"But— but I'm the hurt one!" Draco exclaimed.

"If you can laugh like that, you can sleep on the couch," Harry said, grinning evilly at Draco. "Good night!"

He left the living room and a spluttering Draco behind.

As it turned out, Harry did have to see and help Draco more that evening, with the usual evening chores; brushing teeth and – taking a shower. Harry had just washed the cookie-plate and the coffee-mugs, with Draco sitting next to him in his wheelchair with a towel in his hands, drying the items off, when Draco said,

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

"I would like to shower tonight," Draco said, his voice quiet.

Harry suddenly realised that Draco hadn't had a shower in several days. "Why didn't you say something before?"

## *The Depths of Winter*

Draco's cheeks reddened at the question and Harry understood that embarrassment lay behind. "Well, it's no problem," Harry said. "We'll do it as soon as we're finished here."

Once in the bathroom, Harry helped Draco take his clothes off as he had every day since the very first night. The air was slightly less embarrassed now than the first night after Draco had 'awoken' again, but not much.

"Do you remember how we've done this when you were..." Harry asked, wondering what he should call the state Draco had been in. Comatose? Sleeping?

Draco frowned slightly. "You put me on a chair in the shower and then you cleaned me off, right?" he said finally.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. That's what we're going to continue doing until the spell wears off. I will wash your hair, but you can wash your body if you want to. I will be in the shower with you, to hold you steady and help you. All right?"

Harry noticed Draco swallowing before giving a small nod.

"All right, let's get you out of those boxers, then, and I'll lift you onto the stool in there," Harry said.

He lifted Draco up and Draco pushed his boxers down as far as he could. Harry set him down again and pulled the boxers off completely, his eyes shut as much as possible and when his eyes were open, they were nowhere near Draco's crotch. Instead they landed on Draco's skinny, pale legs.

Draco also had his eyes closed, seemingly thinking that if he didn't see it, it wasn't happening. The blush of humiliation was still there, although Harry was doing his very best in making it as comfortable for him as possible.

Gently, Harry lifted Draco from the wheelchair to the chair in the shower. "Just sit and relax and I'll be in there in a moment," Harry said. He pulled off his own clothes, but left his boxers on.

"Okay," he said, getting back into the shower stall, "tell me if it's too hot or too cold."

## *The Depths of Winter*

He reached over and turned the water on. Draco sat facing the shower stall doors, so that the stream of water hit him on the top and back of his head, where Harry could avoid most of the water – although he was always far from dry when the showers were done.

“Is it all right?”

There was a low, mumbled, “Yes.”

“I’ll do your hair first and then you can wash yourself, okay?”

There was no answer, but Harry assumed it would be all right. He took the shampoo and lathered Draco’s hair, massaging it into his scalp. He hoped to make the showering experience at least a bit positive; so far, Draco had mostly seemed mortified. Of course, for him to go four days without a shower, he would have to be mortified. Harry scolded himself for not remembering, but at the same time he knew why he hadn’t. When Draco had been comatose or whatever, his health and everything else had relied on Harry to be all right. Now that Draco was back to his normal self, a part of Harry forgot that he still wasn’t able to do everything. Taking a shower was such a trivial thing; it was expected that a grown man just *did it*, not that someone else had to remember it for him.

“I’m done,” Harry said after a few minutes of massaging and thoroughly rinsing Draco’s soft hair.

He handed Draco the soap and stood behind the other man as he washed himself, ready to aid him if he needed help or to catch him if he lost balance. The act went without incident, though, with Draco not washing the lower part of his legs, as he couldn’t bend that far and he didn’t ask Harry to do it for him.

Harry turned the water off and swept a big towel around Draco, like parents do with their children.

“Can you dry yourself?”

Draco answered by starting to dry himself. When he couldn’t reach any further – to dry his legs and his hair – Harry took over without a word.

Finally, Harry wheeled Draco into the bedroom. There he helped Draco put his pyjamas on. They were new pyjamas, which they had bought on their shopping trip. They were black silk.

## *The Depths of Winter*

They had been expensive, but considering how much time Draco spent in it and how few other nice clothes they had found, Harry had decided that it didn't matter.

Draco pulled the cover over himself, closing his eyes as Harry turned the light off. "I thought you said I'd be sleeping on the couch tonight."

"Yeah," Harry said. "But like you said, you are the hurt one."

It could have been said mockingly, in a way that would have hurt Draco, but the words came tenderly, soothing Draco's embarrassment. Harry couldn't help but lean forward and brush a stray strand of hair from Draco's eyes. Then he stood and walked out. Just before he reached the door, though, Draco said,

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks."

Harry looked at the blond man lying in his bed and in the weak light from the hallway he thought he could detect a small smile on Draco's lips.

Then he left, closing the door behind him.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter eleven*

*Burn*

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Thursday passed quietly, although there was a growing dread within Harry as he thought about the date with Mona that night. He *really* didn't want to have dinner with her. He felt like when he'd first met Ginny Weasley, who for three years couldn't stop staring moony-eyed at Harry.

He wondered what she was doing now. Perhaps she was married to Neville; they had begun dating during Harry and Neville's sixth year, after all, but Harry barely recalled anything about the events after Ron's death. He didn't remember much at all about what happened at Hogwarts after that.

And he didn't want to remember.

Harry hurried home during lunch with take out for both himself and Draco. Chinese food, with rice and some sort of chicken, that they both thought tasted good enough to eat again. Harry kept an eye on Draco's plate, to see how much the blond ate, and it wasn't much. Draco noticed him staring, though, and remembering how the argument had gone the last time he'd brought the subject up, Harry wisely decided to not say anything just then. He would wait a few more days, or weeks, to see if Draco's eating habits became better.

At the university, Harry talked to Myra and Darius, happily explaining just how much better Draco was getting with each day that passed. Myra still thought Draco should get a medal for getting Harry new clothes.

"Is it okay if I swing by tonight?" she asked. "I would like to meet him again, now that he's talking."

"Yeah, me too," Darius agreed. "Seeing as he's the only thing you talk about these days."

"You're welcome to come by, but can you do it tomorrow instead? I'm— er, not home tonight."

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Hot date?” Darius of course immediately asked.

“Well, a date at least,” Harry muttered and Darius stared.

“You’ve got a *date*? With who?”

“A girl. Mona. She’s nice, I suppose.” Harry shrugged, digging his hands into his pockets.

“You don’t seem too overjoyed with this date,” Myra said, noting Harry’s tone.

“Oh I don’t know,” Harry said, forcing a smile to his lips. “Might turn out nice. Anyway, you can come by tomorrow. Actually, why don’t you two come and have dinner with us tomorrow night?”

“That would be lovely. It has been weeks since we did anything together,” Myra said.

“Yeah, and for some reason, it seems like our fun-together-nights stopped at about the same time as this Draco of yours was re-introduced into your life,” Darius said, smirking.

“Hm, imagine that,” Harry said, sticking his tongue out at Darius, who did the same back. Myra rolled her eyes and muttered something about three-year-olds beneath her breath, before taking them both by their elbows and leading them in the general direction of their next classes.

Harry arrived home again at five thirty, an hour and a half before he was to meet Mona outside of Espresso House.

Draco sat on the couch, watching MTV.

“Draco?”

“Yes?” He managed to drawl just the one word.

“Er—”

“Don’t just stand in front of the TV making that wonderful impression of a fish out of water, Potter – spit it out so I can go back to watching this video.”

“What do I wear?” Harry asked, the words rushed out and his cheeks turning red.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Draco slowly pulled his eyes from the TV to Harry. “Oh right,” he said. “You have a *date* tonight.” He smirked and Harry wasn’t sure he liked the look of it. “And you don’t know what to wear. Well, what is the message you want to send out?”

“Message?”

“Yes, Potter, message. Is it ‘I want to have sex with you on this restaurant table’—“ Harry pulled a face “—obviously not. There goes the leather pants. Damn. All right, is it ‘I’m interested in you, but I want to take things slow?’”

Harry shook his head ‘no’.

“Is it ‘I want to be friends with you?’”

“Um— perhaps?” Harry said.

“Or is it, ‘I am doing this because you begged me and after tonight I don’t want anything to do with you?’”

“Err— yeah,” Harry answered, wincing at the sound of it.

“Well then,” Draco said, “I suggest you go find something from your old wardrobe.” At Harry’s confused face, he continued, “If you put on any of the clothes that I chose for you, she will be drooling all over you and it won’t matter what you say or do – she won’t give up anyway. If you have your old clothes, she is more likely to run screaming in the other direction, if she has any sense of self preservation.”

“Gee, thanks Malfoy,” Harry said.

“You’re welcome,” Draco said, smiling wincingly at him before lowering his eyes to the TV again. “Now go away, I want to watch MTV.”

“You’ve watched MTV all day long!” Harry cried, exasperated.

Draco pulled his eyes from the TV long enough to raise an eyebrow at him. “Your point being?”

“You— Why— Oh, I don’t care. Whatever. I’m going.”

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“I knew that something good was going to come out of your mouth sooner or later.”

Harry just barely resisted sticking his tongue out at Draco, reminding himself that this was Draco with an aristocratic upbringing, rather than Darius, who only had an aristocratic amount of money behind him. Instead, he opted to throw his hands up in the air as he left the room.

Despite Draco’s suggestion to pick something out of his own wardrobe, Harry felt obligated to at least try to dress nicely. So he chose in a pair of jeans and a button-up, white cotton shirt, both items that Draco had chosen. He attempted to brush his hair, but it stayed just as messy as always. Walking back into the living room, Draco looked up at him with a raised eyebrow.

“I thought you didn’t want to impress her,” he said.

“I don’t!” Harry said. “I just – she’s probably dressed up and— well, it would feel wrong if—  
“

Draco rolled his eyes at him. “You are pathetic, Potter.”

“And you’re rude.”

“Great comeback, really.”

Harry responded by pushing the off-button on the TV and leaving the room with a smirk at Draco, who shouted after him, “Hey! I was watching that, Potter! Potter!”

After a few minutes of yelling from Draco, Harry took pity on him and turned the TV on again. “Happy?”

Draco just glared.

At six fifty, Harry left the apartment. The feeling of dread grew stronger with every step he took.

Mona stood outside the café. Harry had to admit that she looked very pretty. Her long dark hair was let down, falling softly down thin shoulders and her cheeks were red, whether from the cool weather or from nervousness, Harry didn’t know. She was wearing a bit too much

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make-up and her jeans were riding a bit too low, but over all, she looked good. As he knew she was trying to make a good impression on him – he was stupid when it came to girls, but not *that* stupid – so when he came up to her, he offered her a smile and said, “You look good.”

Her blush deepened and she found the ground incredibly interesting. “Thanks,” she mumbled.

“So, where to?” Harry asked.

“There is a nice Mexican place called Cantina just a few minutes away from here,” Mona said and quickly added, “If you like Mexican food, I mean. If you don’t, then I’m sure we can find something else—”

Harry interrupted her. “Mexican is fine.”

They walked in an uncomfortable silence, as Mona tried to come up with something to say and Harry tried to think of a way to get out of the dinner as soon as possible without hurting Mona’s feelings. The feeling of dread just grew within him.

The restaurant was nice and small. It was filled with people, despite it being Thursday rather than weekend. Harry thought this was a good sign for what the food would be like. They ordered a salad each for starters; then Harry chose fajitas and Mona enchiladas for the main course.

“So,” Harry began, the uncomfortable silence growing too long. “How has work been?”

“It’s all right,” she said, smiling slightly at him. “It’s a lot to do, but the people who I work with are very nice.”

Harry nodded, as though thinking about what she was saying. The conversation was far from easy-going, with Mona varying between staring, completely fascinated by him, and studying the table or her hands. The salads were very good, though, which was the start of their next conversation. Harry wondered if it would have been better to go to a movie together – except perhaps she would have wanted to sit and snog in there. Harry suppressed a shudder. She was pretty, but he felt nothing for her.

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He found himself wishing that it was Draco he was having dinner with instead. They may insult each other with every other sentence, but at least their conversations and discussions never came to a complete halt, resulting in this uncomfortable, pregnant silence.

“You don’t like tomatoes?” Harry asked, almost slapping himself for the silly question, but he couldn’t come up with anything better.

“Um, no,” Mona said, blushing and her gaze once again going to the table.

Another pause, then Harry asked, “What are you going to do when you leave Espresso House?”

She looked up. “Well, I just started there, so I’m not about to leave just yet. I usually take things as they come, one day to the next.”

“It’s a good way of living,” Harry said.

“What do you do? Other than write books, I mean.”

“I go to the university,” Harry said. “I’m taking English, mostly just to fill my days.”

“Is it anything you want to go deeper into?” She seemed to be getting good at playing journalist, but Harry was growing uncomfortable. He wanted to leave; there was something wrong. The feeling of dread had nothing to do with Mona, Harry realised. It was something else—

“Not really,” Harry said distractedly. “It’s just something to do right now.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Are you still writing?”

“Yes. The next book is due out this fall,” Harry said.

“What’s it about? If you don’t mind me asking, I mean,” Mona said.

“Actually, I can’t tell you. I’m not allowed.” Harry was trying his best to keep his attention on Mona rather than on the growing feeling of horror in his stomach.

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“Oh,” Mona said. She looked at her watch, trying to seem inconspicuous. Harry wondered if she was feeling the same need to get away from the dinner as he was, but he doubted it, considering how insistent she had been that they would do it to begin with.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” she said suddenly. “Excuse me.”

Harry watched her go. His dinner was finished, but he nibbled on a slice of sweet pepper distractedly. He wanted to stand up and leave, to go home and pull his blanket over his head and sleep this horrible sense of dread away. Pure will was all that kept him in his seat, but he did ask for the bill to be brought to them. He wondered if they should split the cost or if he was supposed to be a gentleman and pay for it all. He would; it was no problem, but the women of these days seemed to want to be independent and pay for themselves. He would just have to ask, he decided.

*‘BANG!’*

The tables in the restaurant rattled slightly, the sodas Harry and Mona had been drinking shook but didn’t spill. Harry stood, the chair falling back.

*What the hell?*

Somehow he just *knew* that this was what it had all been about. Throwing a few bills down on the table to cover the dinner, he ran outside. A huge cloud of smoke was rising into the dark sky and Harry ran towards his apartment, all thoughts leaving him. He picked up his cell phone from his pocket and dialed his home number, holding the phone to his ear and hoping desperately that Draco would pick up, but to no avail; it just kept ringing and ringing.

Harry told himself that Draco was just too far away from the phone; the explosion hadn’t been his apartment.

His breathing grew ragged as he kept running down the streets, narrowly avoiding the cars driving down the streets. He barely noticed his surroundings, only that as he was coming closer and closer to his home, he was also coming closer and closer to that huge cloud of smoke—

He turned the corner and stopped dead in his tracks, staring at the apartment building where flames licked the stone walls.

”Oh God, no...”

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He started running again. Off in the distance, he heard the sirens of fire engines, coming closer and closer as Harry threw open the door leading into the building. Smoke welled out and a woman came running out. Harry recognized her as one of his neighbours and his eyes widened when he realised that Draco's life wasn't the only one in danger. She barely noticed him, though, and he went inside, even more intent on finding Draco now. Smoke had already filled the staircase, the air thick and stinging in his eyes. It was hard to breathe.

Harry hoped that the firemen would be coming soon. He heard the sirens closer now, as he took his shirt off and held it over his mouth and nose to help him breathe. His other hands searched for the keys to his apartment. He arrived on the third floor and screamed, "Draco!" through the door as he tried to unlock it with shaking hands. It took almost ten seconds – an eternity – before Harry had managed to put the keys into the keyhole and turned it around, opening the door.

"Draco!"

Inside the apartment, the smoke was much thicker than out in the hallway. The corridor was completely engulfed in flames, the tapestry already gone and the fire now continuing on what lay beyond. Shards of glass lay on the ground; it had been one of the paintings Harry had had on the walls. Harry moved quickly but cautiously down the hallway. The bathroom and his bedroom were both walls of flames.

"Draco! Where are you?"

When Harry heard weak coughing, he ran towards the sound.

Draco lay on the floor in the living room, bloody and sooty, coughing with every other breath as he tried to breathe. His pants were on fire, with Draco trying desperately, failingly, to put it out. There was blood on his hands and face, mixed up with dirt. Flames licked the walls, spreading quickly.

"Harry..." The name was whispered, hoarse, pained. "Why—"

Harry's eyes widened at the implied question. Why he was here? How could he not be? Did he really think Harry would— He broke off, the thoughts upsetting him too much, taking too much time. Instead, he took his shirt from his mouth and ripped it, holding the second piece over Draco's mouth. With the first piece, he put the fire on Draco's jeans out, revealing burnt

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skin. He then proceeded by tying the other cloth around Draco's head, for him to breathe through.

"There, breathe through—"

Just then, a burning something from the ceiling fell and hit Harry over his back. He screamed as it burned his bare back and stars appeared before his eyes as the pain ripped through his body. The burning item slid off his back, leaving Harry panting in pain, shaking as he tried to get onto his feet again.

"Come on, Draco," he said, pulling at the other man, "we need to get out of here."

He could hear the fire engine's sirens coming at the same time as he began coughing himself, having breathed in far too much of the heavy, poisonous gas. Draco also coughed, his breath catching in his throat, but he lifted weak arms around Harry's neck as Harry lifted him. Harry hissed in pain at the raw, newly made injuries on his back.

Suddenly there was a large creak as something in the house began to give.

The world swayed in front of Harry, what little of it he saw. The room was filled with black smoke and Harry couldn't creep along the ground with Draco in his arms. Either way, the mat was also aflame, so it didn't matter. He had to make it to the balcony; the hallway was blocked by the fire now, so they couldn't go down there. Every way but the balcony was blocked. They would have to jump.

Harry took a few unsteady steps forward, towards the balcony door, almost falling to the floor as the fire roared up around him, catching the cloth of his jeans again. It burned through the cloth to the skin and Harry couldn't help but scream again.

The handle of the door was burning hot as well, untouchable. Harry knew he would have to kick the door down. As well as he could with Draco in his arms he raised his burning leg and brought it down on the door with a choked scream. Again and again he kicked at it, fury and pain and desperation blinding him. Between the screams, he coughed, choking on the poisonous air. Finally, not much was left of the previously sturdy door and Harry climbed through the hole he had made, Draco heavy and limp in his arms. He didn't dare look down to discover Draco unconscious – or worse.

The night air, though filled with smoke, felt like heaven to Harry. Down on the ground stood the fire truck and the firemen.

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“HEY!” he screamed down at them, wishing he could wave to get their attention, but his arms were filled with Draco. “HEY! PLEASE! HELP!”

He coughed again, his lungs tightening painfully.

Just then, one of the men down on the ground did look up. Quicker than Harry thought possible, although it still felt like an eternity with the fire licking at his back, the men assembled and motioned for him to let Draco go and they would catch him.

Harry gulped, but knew that there was no other way.

He pulled together the last of his strength to lift Draco over the railing and the men below stood waiting. With his eyes closed, he let go of Draco.

A second later, his eyes were open again and he saw the men catch Draco. The ambulance personnel took over and the men motioned for Harry to jump. Harry’s legs shook as he lifted himself over the railing to jump, and he was just about to let go when—

*‘CRASH!’*

The world shook and the fire no longer licked at him; it surrounded him, creating a world of pain and heat, throwing him forward through the railing and then he was thrown into an endless black pit...

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter twelve Dreams and Reality*

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*Hermione grabbed his arm, pulling him around to face her.*

*“Harry, talk to us, please. We can help you.”*

*Her face had a pleading look and Ron, standing just behind Hermione, had one of confusion and worry. Harry turned again, only to feel a hand a hand on his shoulder. Albus Dumbledore’s serious eyes, shining with unshed tears, looking at him with a small but thankful smile. The scene changed around them, from busy hallways to the Infirmary’s white walls and many beds. Too many of them were occupied. One of them by...*

*...Severus Snape...*

*“He will heal and be well,” Dumbledore said. “You saved his life.”*

*But Severus’ face and body morphed and became bloody, broken... Red hair contrasting harshly with white snow, blood pooling beneath the body... White face, freckles...*

*Ron...*

*“Noo!” Harry screamed, his hand out to grab his best friend. But a figure stood in the way, hindering him from saving Ron. Harry fought the figure in front of him, but it stayed where it was, in front of him, telling him,*

*“It is too late, Harry. He is dead.”*

*The picture turned back to the night in the Infirmary.*

*Harry couldn’t bring himself to feel good about saving his Potions Professor. His hatred towards the horrible man only grew as the seconds passed – why had he been able to help Snape when he hadn’t been able to save Ron? Some best friend he was...*

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*Hatred and darkness filled his heart; the scenery around him changing... Blackness surrounded him; blood and screams – wizards and witches, fighting each other in a war that seemed to never end... People dying; children, women, men; mothers, daughters, cousins, grandparents, friends, enemies, sons, fathers, brothers, sisters...*

*They all died...*

*Harry heard the screams of every one of them in his head.*

*His hatred towards Voldemort and his Death Eaters grew. Then Hermione was back. Harry shook her off.*

*“It’s nothing,” he said. Voldemort wasn’t their problem; it was his, only his. It had been made his when he was only a baby. The dreams – visions, nightmares may be a better word – were thus his problems, not his best friends’.*

*“It is something, Harry!” Hermione shouted after him as he stalked away again. “You’ll have to tell us sooner or later.”*

*Ron’s voice echoed through his head, a ghost’s touch and a horrible reminder of the past. “Harry, you can’t carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. Let us help. Come on, mate.”*

*But Harry looked away and when he looked back up, Ron was gone and the only thing around him was darkness; never ending darkness...*

\*

He became aware of an annoying beeping noise before his senses registered anything else. Then his head filled with pain as the nerves of his body sent him information of just how badly they had been treated, making him ache horribly without mercy.

He only managed to open one eye. He found a dark room, moonlit by strands of light slipping in between closed curtains, and a pale, blond head resting on the side of the bed. Harry’s hand was wrapped in gauze, but on top of that, a ghostly white hand rested gently.

The memories of the burning house came crashing down on Harry. He recalled arriving home to see smoke billowing out of the living room window, running up the stairs, getting his keys and racing into the apartment, all in a fight against time, against hope. The smoke

## *The Depths of Winter*

that had filled his lungs, the flames that had licked at his skin and clothes and consumed everything he owned. He remembered Draco, lying on the floor in his living room, curled on the carpet like a broken doll; he heard Draco's voice, so hoarse and pained,

*"Harry... Why—"*

How could Draco have believed that Harry would not come for him? Of course they hadn't been friends – if you could even call them that – for long, but surely— Harry cared for Draco, he could admit that much to himself. Did Draco think he didn't deserve it?

*"Why—"*

*"It is too late, Harry. He is dead."*

It had happened one too many times already; Harry had no wish for it to ever happen again. It was easy to understand his answer to 'why' when looking at Harry's past. But Draco hadn't. Draco had disappeared the same night that Ron had been found dead. Many believed Draco to be behind the murder, but Harry had strongly doubted it already back then. Then Dumbledore vouched for him and there was no doubt at all left; Draco – Malfoy, back then – hadn't done it.

Still, his brain was too tired to contemplate those memories, so he returned to what had transpired in the burning apartment.

He had let Draco fall from his arms on the balcony. It had been the only way, but still, it had been among the hardest things he'd ever done – and he'd done a lot more in his twenty-two years than most do in a lifetime. Just letting go, putting your trust in someone else's hands like that— he shuddered inwardly at the thought.

He slowly lifted his hand, pain flaring as he did so but he didn't stop. It was the hand that Draco held; Harry raised it to Draco's head where he slowly let the fingers trail the platinum locks and the pointed chin.

Relief poured through him as he let his hand rest where it had been before again; touching Draco made him real. It could easily have been a fragment of his imagination that the men on the ground had caught Draco when Harry had let him go. But now, after touching him, Draco was real again. Real, and obviously all right.

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“I’m glad you’re okay,” Harry mumbled, the words not coming out right, but it didn’t matter because nobody was listening.

Then he let himself close his eyes and relax his body, his mind shutting down and sending him off to dreamland before he even had time to think.

\*

When he woke up again, it was to the same beeping as before. His body ached dully and he could still only see with one eye. He sighed softly, not daring to make any further moves, scared that it would hurt more. In the corner of his eye, he saw Draco sitting by the window in his wheelchair.

“Da’o,” he managed to rasp out, but it was more than enough for Draco’s head to snap up as though there had been a sharp sound.

“Harry,” he said, wheeling himself from the window to the bed. Harry noticed the white gauze covering his right hand. There were a few fading bruises and cuts on his face as well, but they seemed almost healed and it made Harry wonder how long he’d been out.

Draco reached for a glass of water on the table next to the bed and held it to Harry’s lips. Harry drank thankfully, letting the liquid soothe his throat, and one thought flew through his head – the roles had been reversed.

“Than’ ‘ou,” he mumbled, his throat still raw and dry. He felt exhausted just from the feat of saying three words and drinking some water.

“You should rest,” Draco said. He sounded tired, but that was the only feeling apparent in his voice. But what words didn’t cover, his actions did; Draco was here, had been here when Harry had first woken up. That should be enough evidence that the blond man cared, whether or not he wanted to admit it out loud.

“’r you ‘kay?” Harry asked, despite his body’s increasing want for more rest.

“I’m fine,” Draco said. He gave Harry a small smile. “Like the hero you are, you saved me. And you are lucky enough to still be alive as well.” He laughed, harshly but at the same time it was no more than a low chuckle. “You are so stupid sometimes, Potter.” Harry watched him

## *The Depths of Winter*

shake his head and he wondered if those words really were spoken as fondly as it seemed. Draco paused, as though contemplating whether he should continue or not. When he did, Harry understood why he'd been hesitant. His voice was quiet when he said, "The apartment is completely destroyed. The whole building burned down."

Harry felt pain squeeze his heart at the thought. His apartment and all his things, everything he had collected in the last few years – it was all gone. Strange how fire could both keep you alive and kill you. At Hogwarts, it had always kept them warm. Now it had destroyed everything he had.

He looked up, watching Draco with his one good eye.

Perhaps not everything.

Draco was still alive and Harry himself was still alive. That should count for a lot. Things were, after all, replaceable. People weren't replaceable. Harry knew that all too well.

*"I'm sorry... he is dead."*

*"No... he can't be..."*

"Di' an'one else...?" Harry asked, afraid of the answer.

"No, no one else was hurt," Draco said. "It seems Lady Luck was with us. There was only one lady in the house when the bomb exploded, but she was on the first floor and was able to get out by herself, although it took her a while."

Harry briefly recalled the woman who'd gone out when Harry went in. But his mind wasn't on that; it was on the other thing Draco had said.

"Bomb?" Harry repeated. He hadn't thought of what had caused the fire yet. But when he recalled the huge, table-rattling 'boom' that he'd heard at the restaurant, it was obvious that a bomb lay behind it. Again, he thanked the heavens that they were both all right.

"The police have been investigating the rubble," Draco said, "but they haven't found anything so far."

"But – who?" Harry asked, frowning.

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“They don’t know,” Draco said. “You’ll get to talk to them when you get better, though.”

Harry nodded slightly. He wanted to think about it, to figure it out – he wanted to know who had blown his apartment up and almost killed him and Draco. But his brain couldn’t hold the same thought for five seconds now; he was too exhausted.

“Harry, you should get some rest,” Draco said, reaching up and squeezing Harry’s arm a little. “The nurses will have my head otherwise.”

He let go of Harry’s arm and maneuvered the wheelchair back and away from the bed, heading towards the door. He pulled the door open easily; after all, it was a hospital, the doors were supposed to open easily. Just as he was about to wheel out of the room, Harry called his name.

“Draco?”

“Yes?” Draco stopped in the doorway and looked back at Harry.

“You were worth it,” Harry said softly.

Had Harry been closer to Draco, he would have seen the quick flash of emotion going through the grey eyes, but he was on a bed several feet away and thus he did not. Instead he only saw Draco pause for a second before wheeling himself out of the room silently.

\*

When Harry awoke again, Myra and Darius were in the room. Myra looked teary-eyed where she sat on a chair next to Harry’s bed. Darius looked tired, lines of worry on his face.

“G’d morning,” Harry said half-jokingly, his voice barely over a whisper.

“Harry!” Myra squealed and looked about to hug him, but then thought the better of it. Instead she looked at him sternly. “Don’t *ever* scare us like that again.”

“Sorry,” Harry said sheepishly, smiling slightly. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

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“Still, mate, you can’t do that,” Darius said as he bent over and carefully placed Harry’s glasses on him. “s not good for our hearts.”

Harry’s grin grew slightly stronger, although the bruising in his face protested as he did so. He tried stretching, but grimaced as the pain shot through him.

“Harry?” Myra asked worriedly. “Is something wrong?”

“Nah, just – you know, painful burns and all,” Harry said, coughing slightly in pain.

“Should we call on a nurse?” Myra asked.

“No, I’ll be okay,” Harry said, his breathing evening out again. “Where’s Draco?”

“He’s outside, probably drinking coffee,” Myra said with a small smile. “It’s what he’s been doing every minute of the day when he hasn’t been in here.”

Harry snorted, then realised he shouldn’t have done that. His chest and back hurt. For the sake of his friends, though, he didn’t let his pain show on his face. “Great,” he said, “now I’ll have a coffee-oholic on my hands.”

Myra and Darius both smiled slightly at him. After a short pause, Myra asked, “Why did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Go in to find Draco. Why didn’t you wait for the firemen to come and get him out?”

“The fire engines hadn’t arrived when I got there,” Harry said, his voice growing harder at once. “I knew he was up there and I wanted him out. If I hadn’t, he would have been dead by now. Is that so hard to understand?”

Myra quickly shook her head, frowning slightly at him. “No, no— I didn’t mean that it was a bad thing. I just— wondered. I’m – I guess I’m not sure that I would have done it.”

Harry watched her carefully. She seemed honest and as far as Harry knew, she had never lied to him. She was just curious, he decided.

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“You would have,” he said finally, meeting her eyes. “You would have gone in if it was someone you cared for. You sort of don’t think in those situations at all.”

“Do you *ever* think?” Darius asked jokingly.

Harry shot him a one-eyed glare. “Thanks, you’re so kind.”

“Hey, it’s my job,” Darius said, smiling at him. He paused briefly, then said, “I’m glad you went in there. Not glad that you got hurt, of course, but I’m glad he’s still alive.”

Myra nodded. Her voice was thick when she said, “I don’t even want to think about if you hadn’t gone in there.”

“Weren’t you on a date, though?” Darius asked, remembering that piece of information suddenly. “How was it? God-awful as you expected or even a little bit of good?”

“It was just as bad as I expected it to be,” Harry said. “She seemed to have a list of things she was going down when it came to things to talk about.”

Myra cocked her head to the side. “And you just left her in the middle of the date?”

“She went to the bathroom just before it happened,” Harry said. “I sort of just threw a few bills and ran home.”

Myra reached out and petted his hair gently. “Sometimes you are completely amazing, Harry Evans.”

Harry smiled slightly, blushing under Myra’s praise.

“So, do you want me to get Draco?” Myra asked.

“I – yeah, I do,” Harry said.

“Then I’ll go find him.” Myra stood and leaned forward. She placed a kiss on Harry’s forehead. He blushed even more. She grinned at him. “You look like a little schoolboy. Well, a schoolboy who’s been in a bad fight, but still.”

Harry smiled back and watched her as she left the room. Then he looked at Darius, who was also watching the closing the door.

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“Want me to burn you too, so she’ll pet your hair and kiss you too?” Harry teased him. To his surprise, a blush rose on Darius’ cheeks.

“No,” he said defiantly.

“Oh *really?*” Harry said, cocking his head slightly. “D, I didn’t know you’d started fancying Myra.”

“I do *not* fancy Myra,” Darius said, but the increasing blush told another story.

“Spill,” Harry said. “How long?”

“I’m not—” At Harry’s pointed look, Darius trailed off. “Just— I don’t know. She’s just— different.”

“Different from those blonde bimbos named Blossom, Kimberly and Pamela, you mean?” Harry asked, an eyebrow raised. “Yes, she’s definitely different from them. For starters, Myra has a brain. And something tells me that you could fill up the list of Myra’s positive qualities pretty quickly.”

Darius snorted. “I could fill up the list of negative qualities too, thank you very much. She’s a bossy know-it-all, for starters.”

*“She’s a nightmare, honestly.”*

Ron’s words from their first year came back to haunt him and the teasing smile on his face disappeared. Harry remembered multiple times when Ron had called Hermione a ‘bossy know-it-all’, long after they became friends.

“Harry?” Darius asked, worry etching his voice.

Harry blinked. “Sorry,” he said. “I just— never mind. You were saying?”

“Perhaps I should let you rest,” Darius said uncertainly. Then he brightened. “Although how you can be tired after sleeping for five days is beyond me.”

Harry stared. “I was out for *five days?*?”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Darius nodded. “You came in on Thursday and woke up last night, Tuesday. Five days.”

Harry blinked again. “Oh.”

“Either way, I should let you rest. You seem to need it.”

“You just want to get out of the conversation about your sudden interest in our female friend,” Harry said.

“Of course,” Darius said, not missing a beat.

Just then, there was a knock on the door and it opened, revealing Draco and Myra. Myra was pushing Draco.

“Here he is,” she smiled, “our very own coffee-oholic.”

“Every group’s got to have one,” Draco said, smirking. “Glad to see you’re awake, Po— Harry. It was getting boring to watch you sleep.”

“You’ve watched me sleep?” Harry asked, ignoring the slip-up Draco had made with his name.

Draco smirked. “Of course. There’s no better blackmailing material. The things you’ve said in your dreams...”

Harry’s eyes widened, as brief glimpses of the dreams – or memories, rather – came back to him. Pain, death, blood, war— screams echoing through his mind in a never-ending, horrid concert, with pictures just as bad to go with it. His breathing hitched as the memories threatened to overtake him – those were memories he didn’t want to discuss, preferably not ever, and especially not now, in front of Myra and Darius.

Seeing Harry’s panicked look, Draco’s smirk turned into a gentle smile. His hand rested on Harry’s. “I’m joking, Harry.”

Harry nodded, a sense of panic still in him. He took a deep breath to calm himself – and realised that that had been an exceptionally bad idea. He began coughing hard, bending forward, grasping at his chest. He couldn’t breathe properly; the breaths came in hitched gasps.

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“Harry!” he heard both Draco and Myra cry.

Black spots were beginning to appear before him as he tried desperately to get air into his lungs. He felt the wounds on his back, legs and arms open again as he continued to move, trying to breathe. He felt the panic growing within—

“Harry, stay with us! Stop moving! Just breathe, slowly!” Myra said and he felt someone take him around his shoulders and forcing him to stay still.

But the spots grew and within seconds, he felt himself falling into darkness once again.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter thirteen*

### *Saved*

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*Darkness surrounded him. He wasn't sure if he was standing or floating – it wasn't an important detail, but it interested Harry nonetheless.*

*“...Haleth mio san...”*

*A whisper, riding on the wind, although there was no wind in the blackness.*

*A tunnel suddenly lay before him...*

*“..aneth colle galnh...”*

*It was light. Something in him told him to go there, to reach out for the light. It was so dark and the light comforted him. He wanted to escape the darkness—*

*“...Haleth mio...”*

*He took a few steps towards the light; it was easy, it felt so right... His steps were light, light enough to make him wonder if he wasn't flying rather than walking.*

*“...rane salay venetas...”*

*The whisper grew more anxious – worried – intense...*

*Something was wrong; he could feel it, somewhere inside. That voice – that was where he wanted to go. It was kind, loving, warm – far warmer than the light in front of him. Harry took a step backwards, away from the light. It was harder, much harder than walking towards it. His legs felt like lead and suddenly he knew for sure that he was walking rather than flying.*

*But he could do it.*

*“...menea haleth mio san...”*

## *The Depths of Winter*

*Harry took another step backwards. There was something about that voice, that whisper, that was comforting. He wanted to go to it. But the light grew stronger, grasping for him, wanting him—*

“No!”

*He didn't know if it was he or the whisper that said the word. A sharp pain accompanied the outburst and suddenly, Harry could back away from the light faster – he turned and he ran back to the darkness, where the soothing voice was—*

“...Haleth mio san...”

He opened his eyes slowly. Someone held his hand in a gentle grip. Grey eyes watched him intently.

Draco's breath hitched in his throat as Harry's gaze bored into him.

Harry felt tubes up his mouth and nose; he knew he shouldn't do anything but close his eyes and go to sleep again. But before he did, he squeezed Draco's hand weakly. Draco let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding as Harry once again slipped off to sleep.

\*

The nurses were watching him like hawks, checking up on him every half hour. Visitors were supposedly only allowed in there five minutes per hour so that he wouldn't get tired. Myra and Darius were following the rules fairly well but Draco managed to sneak in more than once. As he would only sit there, watching Harry, the nurses didn't mind so much.

Harry slept most of the days away. He was awake long enough to understand that an infection had settled itself on his lungs, which was why he'd had trouble breathing. When he'd moved and upset the burns on his back and legs, his body couldn't deal and he went into shock, which then turned into cardiac arrest. Quick actions by the doctors had gotten his heart to start beating again, but it had been close – too close. The doctors ordered him to rest, stuffing him with medicines. Harry didn't mind; he slept soundly and those few hours of the day when he was awake, he was in a drugged haze.

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Hermione came to the hospital. She followed the Muggle newspapers as well as the Wizarding ones and Harry had been named since he was a famous writer, so she found out quickly. She was horrified by what had happened, of course, and snuck in to see Harry just like Draco did. Since he mostly slept, she didn't get much out of her visits, but that didn't seem to matter to her. She came anyway, like a true friend and started healing him, slowly as to not shock Harry's body further.

There had been others too, coming by to see him – Pally, who just like Hermione had been horrified, and two of Harry's acquaintances from the university. Pally told him to rest and get better and to not worry in the least about his book. Harry wanted to laugh at that – the thought of his new book hadn't so much as crossed his mind – but he was too tired, too drugged, so he just nodded with a distant smile instead.

One week after Harry's second near-death experience, the nurses had finally taken him off most of the pain relievers and Harry was almost awake.

Draco sat next to him, watching him as always. He had a book in his lap. He'd begun reading sometime during the week – Harry couldn't tell the days apart so he had no idea when he'd started, but he had – after Harry had been declared out of the risk-of-dying-zone.

Harry had just woken up from one of his many naps.

"How are you feeling?" Draco asked.

"My head's fuzzy," Harry said, "but it's much better now than before. Where're Myra and Darius?"

"They're at uni," Draco said. "Apparently, the 'my-best-friend-is-in-the-hospital'-excuse didn't help much."

"I don't mind. It's better that they're there, learning and all, than sitting here just worrying about me," Harry said, his eyes closed. He opened them to look at Draco. "Not that I mind."

Draco just looked at him, face blank and eyes passive.

"What are you reading?" Harry asked.

"*About a boy*' by Nick Hornby," said Draco, holding the book up to Harry.

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“Any good?”

Draco shrugged. “It’s okay. Kind of depressing at times, but it’s better to drown in another’s problems, rather than my own. Not that I have any,” he added quickly.

Harry raised an eyebrow at him, but refrained from saying anything. He was too tired to have a long, involved conversation like one about Draco’s problems would be.

“Harry?”

Harry, who had let his eyes fall shut again, opened them slowly. “Yes?”

“The police would like to talk to you,” Draco said. “Not today, but if you’re up to it tomorrow—”

Harry nodded. “Tomorrow’s fine. Have they found anything?”

Draco put the book on the table next to the bed. “They found some parts they believe to be what’s left of the bomb, but they can’t be sure because everything is so badly burned. There is nothing left of the building at all.”

They hadn’t discussed the fire since Harry woke up a week earlier, because this, the way he was today, was the most awake he’d been in that time. Now Harry was curious – and angry at what had happened.

“The buildings around yours were all sooty and the fire spread to one of them, but the fire fighters managed to keep that fire under control,” Draco continued. “The whole thing could have been much, much worse.”

“Do they have any idea—”

“No, not yet. Although...” Draco trailed off, looking away.

“Although what?”

“They have reason to suspect Mona,” Draco said.

“What?” Harry said, dumbfounded. “Mona? As in the girl I went out with that night? But—no. She’s annoying, but—”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“I’m not sure I believe it either, Harry, but the police told me she’s been in psychiatric care before, for several years,” Draco said. “She’s known for violent behaviour – although of course never anything quite like this.”

“But— why would she do it?” Harry couldn’t believe that the small, dark haired girl would do such a thing.

“They don’t have a motive yet,” Draco said. “But they said that for someone who’s been in psychiatric care and is known for being violent – well, she doesn’t really need a motive.”

Harry frowned at him. “Everyone has motives,” he said. “Everyone has some reason or other for doing things, whether it is a belief that the thing they’re doing is ‘the right thing’, or that something has happened to trigger that response. No one would just go and blow another person’s apartment up, just like that – especially not someone who just asked that person out!”

Draco put a calming hand on Harry’s arm. “Calm down,” he said. “Won’t do you any good to need more pain relievers, will it?”

Harry glared at him, although Draco spoke the truth. His anger was directed towards himself, really; he didn’t want to be so weak.

“I’ll talk to the police tomorrow,” Harry said.

“Good. Now rest.”

Harry let his eyes close again, falling into sleep feeling safe because someone was watching over him. Draco picked up his book again.

\*

Two policemen came to talk to Harry the next morning. Both were male, one in his thirties and one closer to fifty, both serious looking and with notepads and pens in their hands.

“Mr. Evans,” the older one greeted him, shaking his hand carefully and sitting down. “I’m Mr. Quasim and this is Mr. Tully.”

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‘Tully’ sounded like something one would name a cat, not a last name, Harry thought and fought a smile. Still high on drugs, he found a lot of things funny. He managed to greet them back instead of laughing.

Draco sat on Harry’s other side; he’d refused to leave and it didn’t matter to the police if he were there.

“We’ll start with what you were doing when the bomb went off,” Mr. Quasim said. “Please tell us with as much detail as possible – relevant details, of course.”

“How do I know what’s relevant?” Harry couldn’t help but ask.

“Just tell us everything you remember,” Mr. Quasim said.

So Harry did. For closer to ten minutes, he told the two gentlemen about his date with Mona and how he rushed back to the apartment after hearing and feeling the ‘boom’. The policemen took notes and ‘hm’-ed here and there, both asking questions when Harry wasn’t specific enough.

“So Ms D’Razi – Mona – went to the bathroom just when the bomb went off?” Mr. Tully asked.

“Er— yes,” Harry said. “Does that matter?”

Mr. Quasim looked at Harry over silver rimmed glasses. “We believe that the bomb had a remote rather than a timer, so that someone could set it off whenever they wanted. If Ms D’Razi went to the bathroom just when the bomb went off, she had the perfect opportunity to do it. I am sure that several women can tell us that Ms D’Razi did indeed go into the bathroom and since we don’t have enough left of the bomb and can’t find the remote, there will be no evidence. It will be very hard to prove it was her.”

Harry just stared at them, his tired brain not completely up to managing all that information.

“But it doesn’t have to be, right? It doesn’t have to be her?” Harry asked.

“No, it doesn’t,” Mr. Quasim said. “Did you have any visitors in the week before the explosion?”

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“Um, well, Mona of course,” Harry said uncertainly. “And Myra and Hermione.”

“Myra as in Myra Pryderi, I assume?” Mr. Quasim asked.

Harry nodded. “She’s one of my best friends.”

“And Hermione?”

“Hermione Granger. She’s a long time friend; I know her from school,” Harry said. “I’m sure she would talk to you if you have any questions.”

“That sounds good,” Mr. Quasim said.

Harry gave them Hermione’s phone number and address, so that they could call her if they had any questions.

“Was there any sign of a break-in in the week before the explosion?”

Harry shook his head slightly. “No, nothing out of the ordinary at all. Draco was home most of the time; we’ve only both been gone for an hour at the time or so.”

“That is enough to get in there and place the bomb, of course,” Mr. Tully said.

“Of course. But there was no sign of any forced entrance,” Harry said.

“Does anyone else have a key to the apartment?”

“Myra has a key, but she’s the only one,” Harry said.

The questioning continued for several more minutes, but Harry couldn’t give them any further relevant information, so finally they stood and thanked him for his time.

Just as the two officers were just about to leave, Harry asked, “Have you talked to Mona yet?”

Mr. Quasim paused and turned to Harry. “No, Mr. Evans, we haven’t.”

Harry frowned. “Why not?”

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“Because we have been unable to find Mona since the night of the explosion. Good day, Mr. Evans.”

\*

“Oh Harry, I’ve been so worried about you,” Hermione said, hugging him carefully.

“I’m fine, Mione, don’t worry about me,” Harry said, smiling at her.

“Why didn’t you come to St Mungo’s instead, Harry?” Hermione said. “We could have healed you much quicker there. I performed a healing spell for your burns the last time I was here, of course, but like with Malfoy’s back, I couldn’t make it all well since it was a while ago since it happened.”

“Mione?”

“Yes?”

“Call him Draco, would you?”

Something passed through her eyes, but it was gone before Harry could identify it. Hesitantly, she asked, “Are you sure he’s okay with that?”

“Well,” Harry said with a smile at her, “he calls you Hermione, so…”

“All right,” Hermione said after a second, “I’ll call him Draco. Anyway. If you want to, I’ll do another healing spell on your burns. I also have gentle version of the Pepper Up potion, if you want that.”

“I’ll take the spell, but I’m skipping the potion,” Harry said. With a smile, he added, “The potions remind me too much of the Infirmary – and the stuff that made Draco all weird. Neither is anything I want to be reminded of.”

Hermione smiled understandingly at him. “Of course.”

When Darius and Myra came in fifteen minutes later, pushing Draco in his wheelchair in front of them, Hermione had mostly healed Harry’s burns. Hermione smiled in recognition at

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Myra, said a nice hello to Draco and greeted Darius warmly. Then she performed a quick memory charm on Myra and Darius, so that they wouldn't think that Harry's incredibly fast recovery was anything strange. She promised to do the same with the nurses and doctors.

"Thanks, 'Mione," Harry said with a big smile as he could finally stretch out for real without risking the wounds on his back to open.

"You're welcome – after all, what are friends for?" She hugged him. "I've got to go now. Have lots to do in school and then I'm working tonight."

"Don't wear yourself out," Harry said.

"Harry, you're talking to the girl who did more than the double amount of classes back in school – I think I can handle it. But thanks for caring."

"Of course I care!" Harry said. "You should come over for dinner some time."

"When you find a new place to live, I'll come over for dinner, promise," said Hermione. "Bye guys!"

The others waved her good bye, even Draco. Harry smiled at him. "See, you can be nice to each other."

"She's okay, I'll admit," Draco said rolling his eyes.

At Darius' and Myra's questioning looks, Harry said, "Draco and Hermione didn't get along very well back in school, but they're getting better, as you just saw. You know, children."

His two friends grinned at him while Draco glared, before Myra became serious. "Harry, where are you going to live?"

Harry opened his mouth, then paused to consider. "I guess we'll live in a hotel until we find something..." He trailed off, realising something. "Draco, where have you been sleeping these last two weeks?"

"Here," Draco said simply. "Mostly."

"Here? In your chair?"

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“Well, the first five days I had my own room and bed, but— yeah, mostly in here, in my wheelchair.”

“He slept at Myra’s a few nights too,” Darius said. “She wanted him to get some real sleep, so she put out an extra mattress in her apartment and he got to sleep there. Then she came and raided my wardrobe for clothes.” Darius pretended to be put out.

“Well, they didn’t fit very well anyway,” Myra said, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at Darius.

Harry watched them interestedly. “Well then, thank you, Myra.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, her glare turning into a smile as she met Harry’s eyes. “He’s a wonderful house guest.”

“Er— are we talking about the same Draco here?”

“Hey! I resent that,” Draco exclaimed. “I’m a perfectly lovely house guest.”

“Yes, you just keep on believing that,” Harry said, grinning at Draco, who glared.

Later that afternoon, Harry was released from the hospital after the doctors seemed satisfied with his magically healed back. They told him to still get plenty of rest, but he would be all right. Harry, Draco, Myra and Darius left together, after Myra and Darius decided that Harry and Draco should stay in their separate apartments at least for the night. Harry was supposed to sleep at Darius’ and Draco at Myra’s, but as it turned out, Myra picked up an extra mattress from her apartment and they all slept over at Darius’. He had a huge apartment with a bedroom, a guestroom, a large bathroom with a bathtub that looked very inviting, a messy kitchen and a spacious, combined dining- and living room – and a lift up to the tenth floor, which was lucky since they didn’t know how they would have gotten Draco up otherwise.

Harry and Darius slept in the guestroom, with Harry on the bed and Darius on the extra mattress Myra had brought, as everyone insisted that Harry should have a comfortable night. Draco slept in Darius’ bedroom and Myra slept on the couch. But before anyone went to sleep, they made dinner.

Darius’ kitchen was in no way as organized and well filled as Myra’s was, since Darius often either ate at a friend’s house or just bought takeout. This meant that the first thing Darius and

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Myra did was go out to shop – Myra went because she knew what they needed, Darius went because he had the credit card.

Harry and Draco were forced to sit on the couch and watch TV.

“You’re supposed to rest,” Myra told Harry in a mothering voice. Harry knew there would be no use in telling her that he wasn’t tired; she would win any discussion. To his surprise, Draco was equally obedient. After Myra left, Harry asked, “I thought you’d put up a fight.”

“Against her? I did that the first night I slept here and I’m *not* doing that again.” Draco looked like he was suppressing a shudder and Harry couldn’t help but laugh.

They watched TV for nearly an hour, sitting in comfortable silence.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” he said to Draco. “With the spell finally off, you can move around as you want. Well, okay— not completely as you—”

“I know what you mean, Potter,” Draco said, smiling slightly. “It’s good to at least be able to move the wheelchair around by myself.”

He paused, watched the TV for a few moments before he turned back to Harry. His eyes were half-closed and the light lashes cast shadows down his fine cheekbones. Harry was shocked to find his heart beating harder in his chest as Draco looked up, his expression showing something that Harry couldn’t read. Harry was suddenly acutely aware of just how close they were sitting – his own jeans and Draco’s track pants were the only thing separating them and he could feel Draco’s body heat through the clothes.

“I’m glad you’re okay too,” Draco said shyly. “I was— scared.”

Harry’s breath hitched and he had to force himself to calm down. He was not supposed to react like this to *Draco Malfoy* of all people.

“I—“

Just at that moment, they heard Darius or Myra push a key into the lock and the moment, whatever it had been, was lost. Draco pulled away and looked up at Myra, who came into the living room as Darius set the two heavy bags of newly bought food in the kitchen.

“Hi boys,” she said happily.

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Half an hour later, Harry was making dinner, with Myra helping. Draco had been promised to get to make the dessert, so for now, he and Darius sat by the TV. Another forty-five minutes, found the four friends around the dinner table. The dinner table was large; it could sit eight people without a problem. The apartment was very spacious over all; Darius' bedroom was huge, with a queen-sized bed, a bookcase with a flat-screen TV, a wardrobe with more clothes than Darius could possibly use. The place reeked of wealth and it was so— so *Darius*.

They spent the dinner telling stories. Most of them were Darius and Myra telling Draco about things – embarrassing things – Harry had done throughout the four years they'd known each other. Draco told them a few things about what his life and Harry was content just listening to the other three, laughing and having a wonderful time. Draco made warm apples filled with melted chocolate for dessert, serving it with ice cream and cream.

“Draco,” said Darius as he munched on the dessert, “this is absolutely delicious. You are welcome here at any time from now on to make desserts for me.”

Draco smirked.

Harry rolled his eyes and said, “Don't inflate his ego too much.”

“Admit it,” Draco said, “you like it too.”

“I never said I didn't,” Harry said, filling his spoon with more apple and ice cream.

“You could start a café business,” Myra suggested. “If you like making desserts, I mean.”

Draco glanced down at his legs and didn't say anything.

“Oh come on,” said Myra. “Don't think about that. Where there's a will, there's a way.”

Draco shrugged. “Maybe,” he said. “We'll see.”

They were up late that night, since it was Friday and no one had to get up the next day.

“He's a cool guy,” Darius said to Harry when they finally made it to bed at closer to three in the morning.

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“Draco? Yeah, I guess he is,” Harry said. He didn’t know quite what to think after what had happened that afternoon, but he decided to play it cool. Darius didn’t need to know, not yet. “He’s grown up a lot since we were in school together.”

“He seems to like you too,” Darius said with a smile.

“We get along now,” Harry said, shrugging, but his heart began beating a little faster. Draco liked him? He felt like a teenage girl with a crush.

They were both silent for a few seconds, before Harry asked, “How is it going with Myra?”

Harry could hear Darius’ blush as he mumbled, “Um—”

“You know,” Harry said, “this is the first time I’ve ever seen you blush about a girl.”

“I’m not blushing!”

Harry snorted. “Yeah right, then you don’t mind if I turn the light on?”

“No, no, that’s not necessary,” Darius said. At Harry’s continued laughter, he fumed, “oh, whatever.”

“You need to tell her,” Harry said.

“I need to do nothing,” Darius said. “It’ll go away sooner or later.”

Harry didn’t think that his friend wanted him to argue that ‘it’ would probably not go away sooner or later. He didn’t want to think about his own ‘it’ and what that meant, either, so he kept quiet. Sleep did not come easy for him that night, because he couldn’t get the feeling of Draco’s leg against his own and how uncertain the grey eyes had looked out of his head.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter fourteen*

### *Arrangements*

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Harry woke up long before Darius did the next morning, so he snuck out of the room quietly. In the kitchen, he found Draco, who looked like he was trying to make coffee, but not succeeding too well because several items that he needed were out of his reach.

Harry opened one of the cabinets, took out two cups and handed them to Draco.

Draco glanced at him, a strange combination of gratitude and annoyance in his voice as he said, "Thanks."

The silence spread between them and Harry wasn't quite sure if it was comfortable or not. After a few minutes, Draco handed Harry a cup of steaming hot coffee. Harry sipped it. "Did you sleep well?" he asked quietly, so as to not wake Myra up, who was sleeping on the couch in the living room.

Draco nodded. "Darius' bed is very comfortable."

"Everything that belongs to Darius is comfortable," Harry smiled. Another silence followed then Harry frowned, "We'll have to go out shopping again."

Draco smiled slightly at him. "Guess so."

"I guess this will be the end of my use of comfortable clothes," Harry said, his grin widening. "Considering how tight everything you decided on was."

Draco didn't grin back; he looked down at the cup he was holding in his hands. "I don't have any money," he said quietly.

Harry frowned at him. "Why would that suddenly matter?"

"Because I can't live off you all the time like a bloody parasite," Draco said angrily, moving to wheel away from Harry. Harry, however, stepped in front of him.

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“Let’s go into Darius’ room so that we don’t wake Myra up,” he said softly. Draco looked up at him, grey eyes unreadable. Harry took the wheelchair’s handles and took them both into Darius’ room, closing the door behind them.

Harry sat down on Darius’ large bed and looked at Draco. The blond in question was wheeling himself back and forth over the floor – Harry was surprised at how good he’d gotten at getting himself around. He looked a bit healthier now than he had two weeks ago; his upper body slightly more muscled because of the exercise the wheelchair gave him. He still looked too pale, though, and his hair could do with a cut. He didn’t have stubble; Draco didn’t seem to have much facial hair at all, except for long, blond eyelashes and thin pale eyebrows.

Finally, Draco stopped, his breath heavy. “I don’t want to live off you anymore, Po—Harry,” he said quietly.

“Why not?” Harry asked. “I mean it doesn’t matter to me. I have more money than I could possibly spend. Or do you not want to live with me anymore? Is that what you’re saying?” He frowned. He didn’t want Draco to leave – not now, possibly not ever. He wanted Draco in his life.

“I was only supposed to stay one night, not five weeks,” Draco said.

“Well technically, it has only been three weeks, since you’ve been staying at the hospital and with Myra the rest of the time,” Harry said trying to lighten the mood.

“Yeah, so now I’m living off your friends as well,” Draco snapped.

“That’s what friends are for!” Harry said in an angry whisper so as to not wake up Myra and Darius.

“They are *your* friends, not mine,” Draco said.

“They *were* my friends, but now they’re *ours*,” Harry said, meeting Draco’s glare with one of his own. “Myra adores you! D thinks you’re cool. Whether you want it or not, they *are* your friends.”

“But I don’t deserve them,” Draco said.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry stared. “What is it you think you deserve?” he asked after several long seconds, his voice quiet yet strong. “Why did you ask me ‘why’ when I came for you up in the apartment? Why do you think that you don’t deserve Myra and Darius as friends? Why don’t you do the exercises I know you’ve figured out that you can do, so that you’ll get better? Why do you think that you *deserve* this?”

Draco stared at him, his face closed off but a war of emotions raging in his eyes. Harry knew that he was about to tell Harry what was wrong.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

Draco’s head snapped around and Harry knew that the moment to get Draco to open up was lost.

“Come in,” he said and Myra stuck her head in.

“Good morning, guys,” she said, opening the door. “Do I smell coffee?”

Draco smirked at her. “Of course. There is a pot out in the kitchen – go grab yourself a cup.”

Myra yawned and smiled. “I’ll definitely do that.”

When Myra left, Draco turned to Harry, looking down at his lap before meeting Harry’s eye. “I’ll stay two more weeks,” he said. “Then I’ll be gone.”

“But—“

Draco left, not seeming to care about what Harry had to say.

Harry bit his lip. He didn’t want Draco to leave and it was not only because Harry wondered what Draco would do instead. In the few weeks they’d lived together, Harry had gotten used to having him around. He wouldn’t have thought so five weeks ago, but it was— nice. Especially now that the spell had worn off so that Draco could move around by himself. He took pride in being independent; it showed.

And Harry didn’t want him to leave.

The smell of bacon and eggs brought him out of his reverie and he walked to the kitchen to find Myra making breakfast.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“I hope you’re hungry,” she smiled.

“Don’t worry,” Harry said, “if we don’t eat it, D will. He’s like a human garbage bin.”

She giggled. “He’s still sleeping, huh?”

“Like a baby or at least he was a half hour ago when I got up,” Harry said.

“That boy sleeps more than anyone else I know,” Myra said. “Do you want pancakes?”

“With the eggs and the bacon?” Harry wrinkled his nose. “No, one at the time is fine. Is there any toast?”

“Yeah, over there. I picked up some cheese and butter yesterday at the store too,” Myra said.

“I don’t want to know what we would have been eating if you hadn’t,” Harry said.

He proceeded to set the table for the four of them. Draco was watching TV, ignoring Harry and the rest of the world. It looked like the news, but Harry wasn’t very interested at the moment. The breakfast and the lovely smell of bacon had his full attention.

“Draco, do you want an egg?” Myra asked.

Draco looked up and shrugged. “Sure.”

”Scrambled?”

“That’ll do.” He returned to the TV.

The breakfast was, despite the strained air between Harry and Draco, pleasant. Light talk between the three of them, never touching any deeper or more complicated issues. After their meal, Darius still hadn’t woken up. Myra and Draco sat down to watch cartoons while Harry thumbed through the day’s newspaper, looking at houses and apartments for sale. He had a notepad next to him and wrote down everything that he wanted his new home to have. After circling several different places, he called around to the brokers and booked times to get a tour ‘round them.

“Draco?”

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The blond man looked away from the TV. He looked slightly annoyed at being interrupted while in the middle of a Scooby Doo episode. Harry ignored the glare.

“Do you want to come with me to check out a few houses and apartments? We can go shopping in between if you want to.” Harry hoped Draco would – perhaps if he could be part of choosing Harry’s new home, he would be more open to staying.

“I’m going to live there for less than two weeks – I doubt you need my input,” Draco said coolly, his attention returning to the TV.

“Draco—”

“What?” Draco snapped. Myra looked surprised at him.

“I need a second opinion on things anyway,” Harry said, trying to sound as cool and detached as Draco was managing, but he had a feeling he was failing.

Myra looked uncertainly between the two of them and finally stood up. “I’m going to the bathroom,” she said quietly and left.

“Why are you being so stupid?” Harry exclaimed.

“Why do you want me here?” Draco countered. “What is it with you and having to do the wounded bird routine?”

“I want you here because when you’re not being a stupid asshole, you are fun company,” Harry said, taking a deep breath to keep his temper in check. “I don’t want anything from you in return, why can’t you get that through your thick skull? And don’t ask why again or I’ll have to hit you over the head with something.”

He ran his hand through his hair, messing it up even more.

“Threatening with physical violence?” Draco spat at him.

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but then Draco’s words sank in and he bit his lip, trying to stop the laughter. It didn’t work. Soon, he started chuckling and soon it grew to a full-blown laughter. Draco glared daggers at him, of course, but when the tears of mirth began spilling over Harry’s cheeks, he started grinning as well.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“I wasn’t – actually – going to – hit you,” Harry said between fits of laughter. “And your face—”

When Myra stuck her head into the living room a few minutes later, she found Harry and Draco both laughing so hard they had trouble breathing.

“Nice to see you smile,” she said, her own grin widening just from watching the young men. “Does this mean you will go with him to check out the houses?”

Draco looked up at Harry, still smiling slightly, and he shrugged. “Sure.”

Harry smiled back at him, drying the tears off with the back of his hand.

“Have you found anything interesting?” Myra asked.

“Oh, there are a few places. There is an apartment in Soho and one in Notting Hill, although those both seem too small. Then I’m checking out three houses a bit further out. It would be nice to live outside of London; somewhere with a little garden, so that I can sit on the porch and write.”

Harry trailed off, realising he sounded ridiculous. “Sorry,” he said. “Just thinking.”

“Fine by me, Harr’, you do it so rarely that every—” She didn’t finish, as Harry threw a ball of paper at her. She laughed at him.

Draco watched the two of them with a small smile. Harry met Draco’s eyes for a brief second and suddenly the world seemed so tranquil, so calm. Draco looked away and the moment was broken.

“Well,” Myra said after she’d finished giggling, “I’m going home. I need to get some studying done.”

At the mention of studies, Harry realised that he was probably way behind in his classes after being gone for two weeks. It was hard being away just a day or two, so he didn’t want to think about what this would bring. Then he reminded himself that he went to university because he wanted something to do, not because he needed good grades to become something, and he relaxed.

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Harry called a cab and remembered to be specific that it had to be one that could fit a wheelchair. It arrived a few minutes later and then Harry and Draco were on their way to see the first apartment.

As Harry had expected, neither the apartment in Soho nor the one in Notting Hill was anything like what he wanted. First of all, they had stairs, and while this wouldn't have been a problem if he'd been living there on his own, it was much more of a problem now that he thought of Draco living with him. On top of that, both apartments were too small – Harry was used to space in his old apartment – and too shabby.

“Next is a one-story house with three bedrooms, one thousand five hundred square feet,” Harry read off his notebook. “But it's a little bit too far outside of London, so I don't know.”

It turned out that the house had lots of things that Harry couldn't accept. To begin with, it had a five stairs to go up just to get into the house. Harry and the broker carried Draco with the wheelchair up the stairs. Then, inside, the hallway was very narrow, only just taking the wheelchair through and every single door had an inch high doorframe. The house over all looked old and shabby, with too few windows and in big need of repairs.

The second house had no stairs to get in, but well inside, there were stairs here and there, as part of the house was slightly higher up than the other part was. Its bathrooms would have to be completely changed to fit a wheelchair at all and the kitchen would have to be re-modelled.

“The last house on the list is a little over one thousand one hundred square feet, with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, kitchen and a combined dining and living room.”

The broker who met them at the door was an older gentleman, probably in his late fifties, with grey hair and small, square glasses. He smiled pleasantly at Harry but took Draco's hand a little more cautiously, as though a person in a wheelchair was dangerous, or perhaps fragile. Draco didn't seem to appreciate the treatment.

The house had stairs up to the front door, but it was only two this time, which made it much easier. The entrance hall and the following hallway were both spacious. Off to the right lay the two bedrooms, with adjoining bathrooms, one with a shower stall and the other one with a bathtub and both bedrooms with large closets.

The living room, situated just down the first hall, was spacious and currently sparsely decorated. The family who lived there right now were minimalists, that much was obvious.

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There was a glassed terrace with large windows letting the daylight in. The dining area lay up in the corner, with the kitchen. Everything was open; very few walls.

“Down that corridor is the garage,” the broker said. “Would you like to see it?”

Harry, who had been deep in thought about the house, nodded.

The garage looked like any other garage – dirty, with two cars and lots of tools that looked unused.

Finally, the broker showed them the backyard.

“It is easily taken care of,” the broker said. “The pair that lives here at the moment says that they spend only a few hours every few weeks tending to it and then it is mostly cutting the grass.”

“It looks fine,” Harry said, smiling. “I would like an inspection to be made on the house to check that there are no hidden problems, but if there aren’t – or they are at least surmountable, then you can consider this house bought. If everything goes according to plan, when can we move in?”

The broker looked slightly shocked; pleasantly so. “The pair has been trying to sell this for over a year – they already have their new apartment ready to move into. We could have you move in here in just a week or two.”

“Make that one and I’ll take it,” Harry said.

“Then we’ll make it one,” the broker promised.

“If it passes the inspection, of course,” Harry said.

“Of course.”

In the taxi on their way home, Harry was humming happily, writing notes in his notebook. He’d gotten two copies of the plan for the house with him and he was now drawing on one of them, chewing thoughtfully on the pencil every now and then.

“What are you writing?” Draco finally snapped, having long since had enough of Harry’s humming.

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“The changes I can make to the house,” Harry said, continuing to draw.

“What changes?”

“So that it becomes wheelchair-friendly, of course.” Harry still didn’t look at him.

“Harry, I’m not staying in your house – that is really not necessary,” Draco snapped at him.

At last, Harry looked up at him, with a small smile on his lips. “Ah, but I have a proposition for you.”

“A proposition?” Draco asked dumbly.

“A proposition.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Let’s hear it.”

“Well, I was thinking – shush, no stupid comments – I was thinking that you could stay with me even after the two weeks are over,” Harry said.

“I just told you—“

“Let me speak to finish,” Harry interrupted him. “I want you to stay with me. Don’t ask me why – I guess I’ve gotten used to your company.” Harry didn’t think that saying anything beyond that would be wise. “Either way, I thought that you can stay, but since you’re intent on being independent, you can pay me rent and pay for your food. That way, you won’t have to go looking for some handicap friendly places to live, because there doesn’t seem to be that many.”

Draco stared at him. After several long moments, he said, “You want me to stay with you.”

“Yes.”

“And you will have me pay rent and my food, to make me feel independent.”

“Yes.”

“And what do you get out of it?”

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Harry shrugged. "Told you, I've gotten used to your company. Living alone would be boring now. You're exciting, I suppose."

"Of course I am," Draco said with an air of Malfoy-ness.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Whatever. So, do you accept the proposal?"

"Let me see those changes you are going to do to the house," Draco said.

Harry handed him the papers and began pointing and explaining. "Well, first off I'm taking the door frames out. They're hell to get over, obviously. Then I'm remaking the second bedroom's bathroom, so that it is a handicap toilet and so that there are bars to help you get around, into the shower and such. In the bathroom that goes with the master bedroom, I'm putting in bars, so that you can take a bath there if you'd like. The closet doors need changing too, to sliding ones, I think that'll be easier."

"You've given this a lot of thought, haven't you?"

Harry gave him a look. "I was actually thinking about doing these changes to the apartment, but now that seems kind of unnecessary, don't you think?"

Draco chuckled, surprising Harry. "A bit."

"Anyway. The kitchen looked pretty good, but some of the cabinets that need lowering, so that you can reach everything, and I'm taking off the doors, so that everything will be easier."

"That's an okay amount to do," Draco said. "Nothing too heavy."

"No, the real work will be with the garage."

"What about it?" Draco asked. "You buying a car?"

"Well, I'm thinking about that too, since we will be living a bit outside of town, but that's not the point. I'll have to build a carport for it if I get one." Harry became lost in thought again.

"What are you doing to the garage?" Draco asked suspiciously.

Harry smiled. "I'm building an inside pool, of course."

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Draco stared with his mouth hanging open.

“That’s a really attractive look for you,” Harry grinned. “What, don’t you like the idea?”

“You are building an inside pool?” Draco said slowly, disbelievingly.

“Yes,” Harry said brightly. “Look,” he said, pointing at the rectangle he’d drawn on the garage’s floor. “One shallow end, one deep, with stairs down. There will be a shower over here—“ he drew on the paper “—and towels here, and then I thought we’d open this storage area up and make it a work out room. What do you think?”

“That this is going to cost,” Draco said faintly, staring at Harry. “You’re insane.”

“Yes,” Harry said, continuing to sketch on the paper. “Don’t worry about the money – I’ve got it.”

Draco shook his head, mumbling under his breath again, “You’re insane.”

Harry just smiled. He knew Draco would stay. He enjoyed the feeling of Draco’s closeness as he continued to watch over Harry’s shoulder as he drew on the papers.

\*

They hadn’t had time to shop between looking at the houses and apartments, so they went on a shorter shopping trip on the late Saturday afternoon. They visited several of the stores they’d been in the last time they went shopping. Draco surprised Harry by remembering his sizes and what sort of pants fit him, which made the shopping go faster.

Draco, however, had just as much trouble as the last time. The changing rooms were far from made for people in wheelchairs and even when they were, Draco had problems getting in and out of the clothes, especially pants. Tired and miserable, he finally decided on two pairs that he thought would fit and a few comfortable shirts and jumpers. They both also bought shoes, two pairs each, another hellish thing for Draco. Harry had to help him put the shoes on towards the end, although it didn’t matter anyway, as Draco couldn’t feel if they fit or not. Draco was tired; he wasn’t wheeling himself on the way back to Darius’ apartment; instead he let Harry push him.

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Arriving at Darius', the delicious smell of food welcomed them.

"There you are," Myra smiled at them from where she stood in the kitchen. "Did you find a house?"

Harry surprised her by nodding. "A very lovely little house. If it comes through the inspection without a problem, I'm buying it."

"You'll have to tell us more over dinner," Myra said. "Darius will be back in about half an hour and the food will be done in forty-five minutes or so, so if you want to take a shower, you have the time."

"Shower sounds very good," Harry said. "We bought some new clothes and I guess it'd be a good thing to be clean when we put them on."

Myra frowned at Draco. "I'm not sure he will be able to shower, though," she said. "D's shower stall is tiny."

Harry looked at Draco, cocking his head to the side. "You can take a bath. His bathtub is huge."

Draco nodded. "Okay."

"I'll get the water running," Harry said and disappeared into the bathroom.

Harry showered first, as the tub filled with water. After finishing, he knocked on the door to Darius' room, where he knew Draco was hiding.

"Bath?"

Draco nodded mutely, his face expressionless. He seemed very good at keeping a blank face.

He wheeled himself into the bathroom and looked at the filled bathtub. Harry followed and closed the door behind them. Draco would not be able to get into the bathtub by himself.

Draco, ignoring Harry, pulled his shirt off and began on his pants. He had become efficient at undressing himself by now; since the spell had lifted, he could bend as he liked. Soon, he was sitting in his boxers. With a small sigh, he took those off as well.

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Harry ignored the feelings stirring within as he saw Draco's pale body; he swallowed and forced himself to look only at Draco's face. Draco didn't need his attraction right now. Harry wasn't sure that he would *ever* need Harry's attraction. Without a word, Harry moved forth, picking Draco up, holding him under his armpits and easing him into the bathtub carefully. When Draco was halfway into the water, he hissed; the water was hot, but his legs couldn't feel it.

"Do you want me to take you out and run some cold water?" Harry asked.

"N-no, I'll be fine," Draco replied quietly. "I'm already getting used to it."

Harry nodded. After letting Draco slip into the water completely, he stood and took shampoo and body wash from the shower stall.

"Use the hand-held shower head to rinse out your hair," Harry said. "Call when you're done or if you need help with anything."

Draco nodded without looking at him and Harry left.

Myra was setting the table when Harry came back out. She smiled softly at him. "How is he?" she asked quietly, so that Draco wouldn't hear.

"I don't know," Harry said. "He doesn't talk to me much about anything."

"He likes you, though," Myra said.

"Hm," Harry said, trying to sound un-committal. Darius telling him that Draco liked him was one thing – Myra saying so was quite another and a much more important one.

"Yeah. Told me so when you were gone in those drug induced sleeps of yours," Myra said, smiling secretly and waking Harry's curiosity. He wouldn't have pegged Draco as one who would admit such a thing to anyone else. Perhaps he truly had been worried when Harry was injured.

"What else did you two talk about?" Harry asked.

"That's none of your business," Myra said with a smile at him. "Get some glasses."

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“Yes, ma’am.”

“Anyway, he likes you. He might not say it out loud, but he does appreciate everything you’ve done for him. I think he’s feeling like you’re giving him everything and he’s not giving you anything back, though – I believe that’s the problem.” She returned to the stove where some sort of sauce was cooking.

“Why does he think he has to give me anything? He *is* already giving me something, that’s what he doesn’t understand,” Harry said. “I was – I was lonely before. I didn’t realise it, but I was. And now I’m not. He’s a good friend.”

She looked up at him, eyeing him with curious dark eyes. “Yes,” she said finally, “he’s a good *friend*.”

Harry stopped in his tracks. “What do you mean by that?” he asked.

She cocked her head to the side, opened her mouth to say something but seemed to decide otherwise, because she just shrugged and said, “Nothing.”

Then she looked down at the sauce she was preparing again.

Harry frowned at her. “Now you sound like that again.”

“Like what?” she asked innocently, meeting his eye.

“Like you know something I don’t.”

“I always know something you don’t, Harr’. Whether it be class work or about feelings – I always know something.” She grinned at him. “You’re a boy and as such quite oblivious.”

Harry stuck his tongue out at her. Then, with a bright smile, he said, “This time, I actually know something *you* don’t.”

“Oh really? And what might that be?”

“Ah, ah,” Harry said, tapping the side of his nose. “If I told you, I wouldn’t know more than you do, would I?”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“No, but then again, I am the one serving food tonight and you may just go hungry if you don’t tell me,” Myra threatened.

“I’ll take that risk.” He grinned at her.

He would definitely take that risk – he wasn’t going to tell Myra that Darius suddenly had decided to be in love with her. It wasn’t his place and besides, he’d never made a good matchmaker. That was the stuff Ginny Weasley had been good at. Too good, really. The air at Hogwarts during Harry’s last two years had been, although darkly overshadowed by the war, drowning in love letters and cupids on pink clouds, charmed to throw two names up in the air and shoot an arrow through them.

Harry shook his head at the memories. Those were some of the few good memories of his last two years.

“Harry?”

Both Myra and Harry looked up at the sound of the tired, soft call. Harry gave Myra a quick smile and went into the bathroom.

Draco’s skin was getting wrinkly, his fingers already resembling pink raisins. He had pulled the plug to the bathtub some time ago, so the tub was almost empty. Draco’s skin had goose bumps; it must be cold to sit, still wet after the bath, in the tub without a towel. Harry quickly took one of the many thick, navy towels and wrapped it around Draco’s shoulders.

Draco fixed the towel and dried himself off a bit before Harry lifted him back into the wheelchair.

“Do – do you want me to dry your hair?” Harry asked.

Hesitating a bit, Draco nodded. Harry took another towel and began to gently squeeze the water out of the blond strands. Draco’s hair was so soft and Harry wondered if all the hair on Draco’s body was that soft. He stopped those thought before they had time to get too far. The blush still crept over his cheeks and he was glad that he was standing behind Draco, out of his line of vision.

“Would you like to go get a haircut?” he asked after a few minutes of quiet work, deciding that talk was a good thing.

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Draco startled. Harry wondered if he'd been falling asleep under his hands.

"Yeah," he said, "I need it."

"That you do," Harry said, teasing gently. "What would your father say?"

"Oh shut up."

Harry did, continuing to dry Draco until his hair was only slightly damp. By that time, Draco seemed to have fallen asleep. Harry wheeled Draco out of the bathroom and the blond man awoke when the cooler air of the hallway hit him, making him shiver. Well inside Darius' bedroom, Harry picked out a pair of boxers, pants and a shirt for Draco to wear.

"Just eat some dinner and then you can sleep," Harry said, yawning himself. "It's been a long day."

Draco nodded. Once he was dressed, Harry took a jacket and handed it to him. Draco looked up at him questioningly.

"You look cold," Harry said.

Grey eyes watched him thoughtfully. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Just then, they heard the outer door slam, followed by the sound of Darius' happy voice. "Smells like food here!"

Draco and Harry rolled their eyes and Harry grabbed the handles of the wheelchair without a word. He knew Draco was tired, but he also knew that the other man wouldn't ask for help, perhaps not even if his life depended on it. He was too proud and it was breaking him.

Myra served pasta with salmon and sauce, Parmesan and a mixed salad. Darius looked at the salad warily. "Never eat things that look too healthy, that's what my mom always told me," he said.

"She did not," Myra said. "Stop whining and eat. It is *healthy* for you, you'll look better and you'll get more girlfriends."

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“Oh, but you know that you are the only one I want,” Darius said theatrically and Harry nearly choked on his food. Darius shot him a look and Harry swallowed, his eyes watering.

“Harry, are you okay?” Myra asked.

“I’m fine,” Harry said. “Just – just swallowed wrong.”

Myra nodded, still looking concerned. The dinner continued without incident after that. When they were done, Draco bid them good night early and Harry retired not long after that. Harry was awoken, however, several hours later, when Darius snuck in to go to bed as well. Harry smiled to himself and fell asleep again, knowing who it was Darius had been talking to and also, somehow, knowing that his two best friends would end up together.

It felt eerily familiar.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter fifteen*

### *Beauty*

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On Sunday morning Harry called around to find a hairdresser whose salon was open on Sundays with a slot open. The sixth one he called turned out to have both.

Myra came into the room when he'd just hung up. "How did the house hunting go last night?" she asked. "You didn't really go into detail last night."

"We were pretty tired," Harry said, smiling, and continued to tell Myra about the house he was pretty sure that he was going to buy.

"Are you sure you don't want to look at more houses before you decide?" Myra asked.

Harry shrugged. "I like the location, the surroundings and the house itself. It has everything I want, almost, and the things it doesn't have are easy to add."

"Like what?"

"An inside pool," Harry said with a grin. Myra reacted much like Draco had done; she stared at him as though he was crazy. Then she frowned, before she brightened with the realization of why Harry was going to build a pool.

"He's going to feel even guiltier now," Myra said, her frown returning.

"He's going to pay me for staying at the house," Harry said. "Oh, don't look at me like that – I didn't want him to do it. I don't need it. But he wanted to. Or, well, he wouldn't have stayed at all if he hadn't been allowed to pay."

She shook her head. "You guys are strange," she said. "Anyway, do you need an inspector to check the house out?"

"Yes, I was going to look into that," Harry said. "Do you know anyone?"

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“Yeah,” she said, “that’s why I brought it up. My uncle works as one, so he could do the check if you want to.”

“That sounds great,” Harry said.

Myra gave him her uncle’s number and then she left, saying she had to go home to study. “If you need help catching up, I can help you,” she said with a smile. “It’s been a while since I took the class but I’m sure I remember it. You’ve missed quite a bit.”

“I guess I have,” Harry said. “Oh, Myra?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have those papers I gave you? The beginning of the story I asked you to look at?”

Myra smiled at him. “You mean the one about a man called ‘Dragon?’”

Harry blushed. “That would be the one,” he said.

“I do. It’s at home, safely tucked away among a billion other papers,” she said.

“I’m glad that I gave you those papers,” Harry said. “There is absolutely nothing left of the laptop, after all. It would have sucked to have had to start over.”

They continued talking about insurance and how much of Harry’s things had been lost in the fire. The items he would have liked the most to have with him were photos and his writing books, where he kept notes and ideas about life, new stories and everything in between. Clothes, shoes, tables, the couch – those were the things he didn’t care about. Sure, it was annoying to have to go out and buy new things, but those things still didn’t have any emotional value.

He was glad that his wand was locked away in a safety box at the bank and he was even happier that he’d made a habit of wearing the key for that vault around his neck. He didn’t know exactly why he did it – it was a bit of a reminder of his past, and even though he wanted to forget, he knew he would never be able to forget completely. Although he didn’t practice magic anymore, he didn’t want his wand destroyed. It was a part of him.

Myra left. After calling her uncle, Harry walked out to the living room to find Darius and Draco watching TV.

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“Re-runs of ‘Survivor?’” he asked. “I think the cartoons were better.”

Darius stuck his tongue out at Harry. “This is highly stimulating and interesting, watching people interact with each other. If I were a psychology teacher, I would show this to the classes to make them understand.”

“There’s a reason why you’re not a psychology teacher,” Harry said, sitting down between the other two.

“You’re rude,” Darius whined.

“And you’re like a three-year-old. Draco, I have made an appointment at a hairdresser for today. It’s at eleven thirty.”

Draco turned and looked at him. “Thanks.” He sounded oddly grateful, as though he hadn’t expected Harry to actually get him an appointment, despite asking the previous day.

“So we’ll leave in half an hour. It’s not that far away, so we don’t need to take a taxi,” he said. “Or is there anything else you’d like to do before?”

Draco shrugged. “Not really. Although anything would be better than watching this. I swear I can feel my brain cells dying.”

“Hey!” Darius said.

“Don’t worry,” Harry said, turning to Darius and patting him on the shoulder. “Your brain cells aren’t dying. They’re already long, long gone.”

Darius pouted at them and Harry laughed. To his surprise, he heard Draco chuckle lightly behind him.

\*

Closer to three hours later, the hairdresser was obviously relieved to see Draco go and Harry was glad to leave. Draco had to be one of the most annoying people on the planet when it

## *The Depths of Winter*

came to his hair. He wanted this but not that, a little shorter there – not that short! – and a little longer there – and cut carefully, my hair is very fine—

“You’re gay, right?” he asked as he pushed the chair out of the salon.

“I happen to take pride in my hair, that does not mean I’m gay,” Draco said, beginning to wheel the chair by himself. Harry walked up beside him instead.

“No, but then we add the fashion sense and the fact that you bake cookies by your own free will—”

”I didn’t hear you complain,” Draco said, one fine eyebrow raised.

“You want lunch?”

“Did you run out of snappy comebacks?”

“No, but I did get bored with our so-called discussion and there are two very nice restaurants just over there,” Harry said, pointing.

Draco agreed and they made their way over to the restaurants. Harry watched Draco out of the corner of his eye; the way Draco made his way between the people on the pavement and over the uneven ground. Harry was, again, impressed with how quickly Draco had learned to manoeuvre the wheelchair. He seemed oddly graceful, even confined to it. There was a beauty in the way he moved that made his breath hitch. It made him want to reach out and touch that pale skin, to be part of the beauty.

He nearly snorted at himself. He would never be called a ‘beauty’. It would be rather like Beauty and the Beast if Harry and Draco ever became anything *more*. He hurried to catch up with Draco.

Lunch passed smoothly. Draco seemed quiet, a bit tired, but still had his wit with him, making Harry chuckle happily several times. The comments weren’t negative and hurtful as they once had been – they were sarcastic but never ill meaning. Harry found himself enjoying the company immensely and could only hope that Draco felt the same.

After finishing their lunch – which Harry paid for, never even consulting Draco about it – Harry walked Draco back to the apartment. Draco wheeled himself and by the time they arrived to Darius’ apartment, he was heaving and sweating with the effort. Still, Harry knew it

## *The Depths of Winter*

had to do with his Malfoy pride and he didn't help. Harry, who had had a key to the apartment for years, let Draco in. The blond disappeared into Darius' room and Harry was quite sure he was going to take a nap. Harry on the other hand, left to meet Myra's uncle, to go through the inspection of the house.

Later that afternoon, Harry signed a few papers and suddenly, he was a house owner.

\*

Harry was back at the university the next morning. A lot of students watched him curiously, having read the papers about the explosion and fire. Harry wanted to go somewhere and hide. He hated being a public person.

"Shouldn't have published two books if you didn't want to become a bit famous, Harr'," Myra said.

"Yes, yes, thank you for telling me," Harry said. "Can we just go inside? Hopefully the professors won't be staring as much."

They didn't but class was far from enjoyable for Harry anyway, because he had gotten far behind in the two weeks he'd been gone. He sat and tried to understand what they were talking about, but failed quite miserably most of the time. When the day's classes were over, Harry followed Myra home to her apartment, to have her help him. Still, it didn't make him understand completely, as it had been a while since Myra had taken the class. Darius wouldn't be much help either way; he hadn't taken the class at all.

Myra's apartment was much smaller than Darius'. It was smaller than Harry's apartment had been, too, actually. It was only two rooms – a small bedroom and a combined kitchen and living room – and the bathroom. Still, Myra had managed to make it cosy – and she had filled almost every wall with bookcases, filled to the brim with books of all sizes. Harry was sure that Hermione would like Myra's apartment.

The two sat down at the wooden kitchen table and Myra began explaining the class work to Harry.

When the clock hit one thirty in the morning, Myra yawned and said, "I need to sleep or I won't live through classes tomorrow."

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Harry shot a bleary eye at the clock. He doubted that any of the things they had gone through in the last hour actually had stuck in his head. “Yeah. Bed,” he said.

“You’re sleeping on the couch,” Myra told him. “No whining.”

“Don’t worry, I slept on the couch for three weeks before the apartment blew up,” Harry said with a small smile. At her look, he added, “Only one bed. I couldn’t very well put Draco on the couch.”

She smiled back at him. “You’re a softie inside.”

He yawned. “Just don’t tell anyone.”

“Not even Draco?”

“Especially not Draco. I’d never hear the end of it.” Harry winced as he imagined the billions of ways Draco would tease him.

“Oh, but he’s a softie too,” Myra said.

“I think he’s mostly sarcastic,” Harry said, but he smiled fondly as he remembered some of the insults.

“He sat by your bed for two weeks, barely eating or sleeping,” Myra said, raising an eyebrow at him in challenge. “If that isn’t softness, then I don’t know what is.”

Harry smiled tenderly and felt his heart beat faster at the memory of waking up with Draco sitting there, holding his hand. “I’m glad he was there when I woke up,” he said.

“Did you know he stayed in there when you had your cardiac arrest too?” Myra asked.

“He stayed? In the room?” Harry had no idea.

“Yeah,” Myra said. “Refused to leave. I don’t know why. One of the nurses said that there seemed to be some sort of power around him that made the doctors afraid to go near him. So they left him there. He sat there, mumbling something.”

“...*Haleth mio san...*”

## *The Depths of Winter*

*...A whisper, riding on the wind...*

“No one could tell what it was he was whispering,” Myra continued, but trailed off, looking at her friend. “Harry?”

*...A tunnel lay before him...*

*“..aneth colle galnh...”*

“Harry?”

“What else did the nurse say he did?” Harry asked distractedly, hoping to keep the fleeting memories coming.

“She didn’t say much more. They couldn’t understand what he was muttering about. But when your heart wouldn’t start again, she said his mumbling got stronger, more desperate.”

*He took a few steps towards the light; it was easy, it felt so right...*

*“...rane salay venetas...”*

*The whisper grew more anxious... worried... intense...*

“Then your heart was beating again and she couldn’t say if he continued at all; there was too much commotion,” Myra said. “Harry?”

*Harry took a step backwards, away from the light. It was harder...*

*But he could do it.*

*“...menea baleth mio san...”*

Harry smiled softly. “I remember it,” he said voice barely more than a whisper. “He was the one who brought me back.”

Myra looked at him, her face set in a thoughtful frown. “He did a blood exchange with you just afterwards,” she said.

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Harry's head snapped up. "He did a what?"

"He slashed his hand with a knife and then he slashed yours and he let your blood mix with his," she said. "He doesn't know that I know. I had knocked, but I guess he was too into what he was doing, so he didn't hear it. I opened the door and saw him holding your hand. I understood what he'd done when I saw blood dripping."

"You didn't do anything?" Harry asked.

"No, he began cleaning you up almost immediately and I recognized the ritual as one shared between friends. It used to be what you did to become so called 'blood brothers' – it is something you only share with a person you care very much for. Since the two of you have been friends for years, I didn't see anything wrong with it."

"I—" Harry began, but then he closed his mouth. His heart was beating madly against his chest. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't know," Myra said. "But it sounded like he was working some kind of magic."

Harry's head snapped up. "Magic?"

"I know, it sounds crazy," Myra said with an easy laugh. "But come on, him muttering something when you were dying, having an aura of strength around him, and then sharing blood? Sounds like magic to me. Or, perhaps, desperate hope."

"Yeah," Harry said, frowning. "Probably just desperate hope."

Myra yawned again. "Let's go to bed," she said. "I'm beat."

Harry nodded, still distracted by what Myra had told him. At first he wanted to go over and talk to Draco about it, ask him why he'd done it. Why share blood, why the spell? Harry didn't even know if it was a spell; Draco didn't have a wand, as far as Harry knew. Then Harry realised one important part:

Draco hadn't told him.

He had saved Harry's life but hadn't told him.

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That meant that Draco didn't want it to be brought up. When Harry thought about it, he realised that talking about it would bring up way too many uncomfortable questions. Questions about caring, worrying, liking, *loving* – questions neither of them wanted to face.

Finally, Harry fell into an uneasy slumber.

\*

The next few days passed in a blurry mess for Harry. He was up from early morning to late night, trying to keep up with his class work and at the same time buying new things for his house. He had sent Draco out on Tuesday to find a new couch and table for the living room, as well as a bed for himself. Harry wanted to try out his own bed, although he let Draco buy covers and pillows.

When Harry saw the couch and table Draco had chosen, he promptly decided that Draco could decorate the whole house. Harry would only add a few personal items here and there.

Harry, of course, couldn't resist teasing. "When you add up the hair, the clothes, the cookie-baking, the ability to make anything and everyone look nice – you really are gay, aren't you?"

"Would it bother you?"

The question took Harry aback, but then he shook his head. "Of course not. Coming from someone who 'plays for both teams' if you will, I'm really not in a position to judge."

Harry enjoyed the rare moment of speechlessness from Draco.

"So are you?" Harry asked, never one to be able to hold back his curiosity.

Draco sneered at him. "That is really none of your business," he said and went back to look through catalogues to find a glass table to have in the living room, ignoring Harry. Harry looked over his shoulder, looking at the various styles as well, although only partly paying attention to it. His eyes strayed to the blond; he watched Draco chew on his lips as he found several different choices that he found good enough. The sunlight fell in through the window, making Draco's hair shine like gold, the soft strands falling into his eyes so that he had to push them away at regular intervals. His skin, such creamy perfection... His mind wandered

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back to the day at Darius' apartment and he remembered the feeling of Draco's warm skin, separated from his own only by two pieces of clothing.

"Harry?"

Draco was looking at him curiously; the previous annoyance seemed to be gone.

"Sorry," Harry said. "Got caught in a memory."

Draco looked as though he wanted to ask which one, but after a long look, he just shrugged.

"What do you think about this one?" he asked and pointed at a low glass table in an uneven shape.

"It looks very nice," Harry said. Hardly anything Draco showed him looked anything but nice.

The work with digging out the garage to make it an inside pool area began immediately. The walls were covered with isolation materials, huge windows were put in and a shower next to the laundry room – which was between the kitchen and the garage – was built. Draco and Harry chose the tiles together. They decided on a grey and white theme, with the occasional black detail. The pool was to have one deep end and one shallow, with stairs down in one end.

On Friday, almost a week after they had first seen the house, Harry and Draco were sitting on the newly bought, dark grey couch in the living room. A low table with wooden legs and a glass top stood before them, already messy with magazines. Harry wanted the house to feel at home right away.

"To make it all instantly messy is not the way to do it," Draco had snapped as Harry had placed the magazines on the table.

"My house, Draco, my rules," Harry had said.

He had realised his mistake in saying it as soon as the words had left his mouth, but by then it had been too late. Now the two sat quietly watching TV. It was a large TV, placed in a wooden bookcase. The bookcase looked a bit stupid, as it didn't have a single book, only a vase with flowers standing on one of the shelves. Books would have to come later.

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It was safe to say that neither man was actually watching the program, since the TV was currently showing Jerry Springer and four or five guests were screaming and making rude gestures.

“I think we should have a house-warming party,” Harry said thoughtfully.

Draco didn’t answer.

“Draco, what do you think?”

“Do what you want, *Potter*, it’s your house,” Draco said coolly.

“Draco, I didn’t mean it like that,” Harry said, fighting the urge to roll his eyes at the blond. He was hormonal like a girl at *that* time of the month.

“But it’s true,” Draco said, turning to him. “It is your house. I’m only a guest. A *temporary* guest.”

“Haven’t we gone over this already?” Harry asked, getting annoyed.

“Yes, you gave me an offer I just couldn’t refuse,” Draco said sarcastically.

“That was exactly what it was – an offer,” Harry said. “You didn’t have to accept it. I want you here – you’re the one who keeps saying you have to give me something for it.”

“And I have yet to figure out why the hell you would want a paralysed, wheelchair-tied, ex-enemy from school in your home,” Draco said. “Is it some sort of sick sadistic streak in you? To watch another person suffer?”

“I am not a sadist,” Harry growled at him. “I like your company. Well, I usually do, but at the moment, you’re acting like an idiot. I want you here because when you’re not whiny and stupid, you are an intelligent, witty person whose company I enjoy.”

“But—” Draco said but Harry interrupted him.

“You keep putting yourself down, Draco,” Harry said, frowning at him. “Why? I asked you a week ago – why do you think that you deserve what has happened to you? What happened after you left Hogwarts in seventh year? What made you leave?”

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Draco stared at him, a storm in the grey eyes. Harry met his eyes calmly, although his desperation showed through. He wanted to know, wanted to understand so that he could help. He was never one to sit on the sidelines and watch; he had to help if he could.

Finally came the whispered words. “I can’t tell you.”

Frustrated, Harry stood up, raking a hand through his hair. “Why not, Malfoy? What horrible deed did you do? Did Dumbledore send you away? Were you on a mission for the Death Eaters? Did you kill Ron after all, like the other students thought? Where were you in the final fight against Voldemort? Were you on our side or theirs? I don’t even know that much.”

Harry trailed off, watching Draco. A slight wince at the Dark Lord’s name, but other than that, Draco’s feelings hadn’t shown throughout Harry’s tirade. A blank mask had been placed over him, keeping Harry from the truth.

Defeated, Harry sat down again.

Minutes passed in silence. Then Harry looked up and asked tiredly, “Do you still want me to contact a specialist to put a training program together for you? I forgot about that before the explosion and, well, things have been a bit crazy since.”

Draco looked at him, through him as he had done several times in the beginning, before nodding. “I—I read a bit about it in those books you gave me,” he said quietly. “Although that was before—”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “You won’t have much use of those books now. Unless you can read ashes.”

Draco gave him a weak smile at the attempted joke. Harry stood and left the room, returning a minute later with his new laptop that he’d bought a few days earlier. “Here,” he said, turning it on and clicking to go online. “You can go through this site and see if there are any books you’d like me to order.”

He showed Draco one of the shopping sites and how to put the books, movies and CDs into the basket, as well as how to search.

“Order anything you want,” Harry said. “We need to fill these bookcases up. Don’t worry about the money. If you feel like you’re living off me again, then just remember that if you leave, I’m keeping the books, so you’re really just ordering for me. Or something.”

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“It’s not the first time I use a computer, Potter, I’m sure I can handle it.”

“Uh, okay. I— I’ll make dinner. Is pasta okay?”

Draco nodded. Harry walked over to the kitchen, which also lacked in equipment since kitchen gear wasn’t high on the priorities-list. As he stood there, starting on the dinner, Draco turned to him.

“I think a house-warming party would be great,” he said quietly.

Harry smiled at him.

They were getting somewhere.

\*

Harry called Myra and Darius that night and asked them if they wanted to come over for the party the next night. Neither of his friends had been to the house yet, as Harry didn’t want them to come until they had at least the basic furniture, so they were both excited to come out.

“You should invite Hermione,” Draco said after Harry had finished talking to his friends.

“Do you want her here? And don’t tell me it’s my house, or I’ll scream,” Harry said warningly.

“Wouldn’t want you to do that,” Draco said, rolling his eyes. “It’s okay if you invite her. She’s— she’s been pretty nice.”

Harry smiled then and called Hermione. She was bubbling with excitement about seeing his new home, asking a billion questions. Harry only told her that she would have to come see for herself the next day. They continued to talk about other things – Hermione inquired how Harry’s wounds were now and Harry promised her that they were fine.

“I was so scared when I read that you’d been hurt,” she told him. “And taken to a Muggle hospital instead of St Mungo’s – no one was sure if you’d survive at all.”

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By the time Harry had finished talking to Hermione, it was bedtime. He heard the TV in the living room and left his own room to see if Draco was still up.

He smiled softly when he found Draco fast asleep on the couch.

Harry picked up the remote and turned the TV off. The sudden cease of sound, or possibly the creaking of the wooden floor beneath Harry's feet, woke Draco up. He opened grey, tired eyes slowly.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Twelve," Harry said.

Draco moved to get up but Harry placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Relax," he said.

Grey eyes met green uncertainly, but Draco accepted without words when Harry lifted him to take him to his room. One arm around Harry's neck, he leaned his head against Harry's shoulder, closing his eyes and drifting off to sleep again. Harry entered Draco's dark room and stepped inside carefully, not wanting to turn the light on, instead waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Draco's room was still bare; only his bed and a bookcase were in place. The walls were painted green and the room still smelled of paint.

Harry placed Draco on the bed gently and Draco didn't even open his eyes as Harry tucked him in, pulling the covers up to his chin.

Hesitating, with his heart beating wildly in his chest, he bent down and placed a gentle kiss on Draco's forehead, unable to stop himself. His breath hitched as Draco moved and smiled slightly, his heart feeling like it was going to beat a hole through his chest.

With a last, small smile, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter sixteen*

### *House-warming*

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The next day, Draco was already awake and eating breakfast when Harry staggered out of bed. Yawning and slumping down in one of the eight chairs around the table, Draco handed him a cup of coffee without a word. Harry, still half asleep took a sip.

“Ew,” he said, grimacing. “Give me the sugar.”

Draco rolled his eyes and gave Harry what he’d asked for. “Ruin perfectly good coffee with sugar.”

“You have yours with *milk*,” Harry said once he’d gulped the coffee down.

“Yes, and?”

Harry didn’t bother to answer. After buttering a piece of toast, he said, “We need to go shopping today.”

“Hm, yes, party tonight,” Draco said. “It would be good to have some food to serve.”

“Yeah, and plates for all the people coming,” Harry said.

“All the people? How many have you invited?”

“Oh, just Mione, Myra and Darius,” Harry said. “But knowing Darius, he’ll bring a few friends. You’ll like them – they’re all girls, blonde and usually wear very little clothes.”

“Isn’t Darius into Myra?” Draco asked.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Been eaves-dropping on our conversations, have you?”

Draco just rolled his eyes. “Of course not, I have been bored but not *that* bored. But those two – they’re like Weasley and Granger all over again.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

He snapped his mouth shut as soon as the sentence was out. Unknown emotions flashed in his eyes, but disappeared behind a cool mask before Harry had time to understand what they were. Harry was too filled up with his own overwhelming emotions at the moment. Draco had said Ron's name. No one had said Ron's name out loud in his presence since he left Hogwarts.

"I— I—" Draco began, for once at a loss for words.

Harry held up a shaking hand, his eyes tightly shut against fleeting memories invading his mind. "Don't – it doesn't matter."

"You – we need to talk about it some time," Draco said quietly.

Harry stared at him. "*You* want to talk about it?"

"No," Draco said. "But we have to if this is going to work."

Harry took a deep, shaky breath. He opened his eyes slowly, almost expecting to look into pale blue eyes that had been dead for years. His memories were vivid, colourful, powerful, happy, sad, all at once, overwhelming him. Yet when he opened his eyes, he was met with intense, stormy grey eyes that were fighting hard to keep the blank mask intact.

"Not today," Harry whispered.

Draco understood, although Harry wasn't sure why or how. But he knew that Harry wouldn't be able to handle a conversation like that if they were to have a party that night. Harry didn't have the many years of training in acting properly even when breaking down on the inside that Draco had. If he had the conversation now, then Harry would be bleeding, open; he definitely wouldn't be able to handle having guests.

Draco stretched his hand out and squeezed Harry's hand gently. Harry looked up, green eyes startled.

"Let's go get some groceries and I'll start preparing the food for tonight," Draco said and Harry was surprised by the softness of his voice. Draco could really be gentle and comforting when he wanted to, he realised. Then he remembered how Draco had been with him at the hospital and he realised that he had already known Draco's softer side.

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*“Oh, but he’s a softie too,”* Myra had said.

*“He sat by your bed for two weeks, barely eating or sleeping. If that isn’t softness, then I don’t know what is.”*

“Yeah,” Harry said, his voice still shaking. “Let’s go shopping.”

The grocery store was a twenty-minute walk away from the house and it passed quietly. Once at the store, however, Draco seemed to be making an effort to make Harry forget their earlier conversation, as he suggested foods for the evening.

“We don’t want anything that is sit-down-and-serve,” he said, “especially since we don’t know how many guests are coming.”

“But if not – what else is there?”

“A buffet of course,” Draco said with a French accent. “Some bread, butter, a few different kinds of cheese, a salad and some meat. If there are leftovers, it will be easy to cook a meal out of it.”

Harry just nodded. It sounded like a good plan. Harry was good at making food but planning a dinner for more than himself and one more person, that was beyond him. He just followed Draco around as he wheeled himself through the store, picking out groceries. Occasionally he had to stretch and take down whatever item Draco wanted, but other than that, his role was very passive, except for the one time.

“We need some of these,” Harry said.

“Smoke detectors?” Draco snorted. “Yes, that might be a good idea after what happened with your apartment.”

The groceries filled two heavy bags, which Harry carried out of the store. Well outside, Harry stopped.

“Draco?” His voice was hesitant.

“Yes?” Draco squinted up at him against the sun.

“Would you mind – I could push your wheelchair—“

## *The Depths of Winter*

“No thanks, Potter, I’ll do it myself,” Draco sneered at him, reminding Harry of the Draco he’d known at Hogwarts.

“No, no,” Harry said, “it wasn’t to— It’s just— these bags are heavy and I thought I could hang them on the handles of the wheelchair, but it’d get heavier for you and—”

Draco regarded him silently for a few moments. “Okay,” he said finally.

Harry, who’d been studying the ground, looked up and smiled at Draco. He didn’t say another word, only hung the bags like he said he would and started pushing the wheelchair towards their home.

When they got home, Harry cleaned the house and put the smoke detectors up while Draco collapsed on the couch, beat from the trip to the store. He turned the TV on and sleepily watched some soap. Harry made them lunch at about two in the afternoon. Sandwiches, made with some of the new bread they’d bought.

“When are they coming?” Draco asked, brushing crumbs off his shirt.

“At six,” Harry said. “Should we start on the food?”

“Three and a half hours before they arrive when we’re serving all cold food? Most definitely not,” Draco said. “Have you never had a dinner party before?”

“No, actually I haven’t,” Harry said. “And how is it that you know so much about it?”

“I’m a Malfoy, remember?” Harry was surprised by the vehemence when Draco said his last name.

“How could I forget,” Harry mumbled.

“We had dinner parties once a week,” Draco said. “I wasn’t there at most of them, of course, because father rarely wanted me there. But I still learned.”

“I thought your house-elves made the food,” Harry said carefully, knowing they were both treading on territory that would be best left alone at the moment.

“They did. But I snuck down there quite often,” Draco said. “I never thought I’d have to use the knowledge of course, but it was fun terrorizing the house elves.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Fun?” Harry echoed, involuntarily recalling Dobby when he’d been under Lucius’ command.

“I didn’t hurt them,” Draco said, “so don’t look at me like that. I am not my father.”

No, Harry thought, Draco was most certainly not his father. They looked a bit alike; both pale, with the white-blond hair and silver eyes. But Lucius had always been bigger, more dangerous than Draco had ever managed to become. Now, when Harry looked at Draco, the differences between Draco and Lucius were much more striking than the ways they looked alike. Draco, though he’d gained a small amount of muscles on his upper body by now, was still frail and weak – although Harry hesitated to use the word when it came to Draco; it just wasn’t him – whereas Harry’s memories of Lucius had been a tall, slim yet well-muscled and terrifying man.

Then again, Lucius Malfoy was rotting away in Azkaban as far as Harry knew and it was possible that father and son did look alike after all.

But beyond the physical aspects, the two were nothing alike. Lucius was cold, calculating, dangerous. Draco was— Draco was passionate, moody, spoiled yet at the same time oddly thankful for life’s gifts. He was strong, much stronger than Harry had believed him to be.

“Harry?”

Draco waved his hand in front of Harry’s face to bring him back from his reverie. He didn’t ask questions on where Harry had been; he only sat back on the couch and returned his attention to the TV. Harry shook his head and disappeared into his bedroom, where he sat down and wrote another fifteen pages on his new story.

\*

At exactly seven, the doorbell rang. Harry, who’d been pouring champagne into glasses, went to open the door.

Hermione stood outside, smiling. “I’m already in love with the outside of your house,” she said. “It looks wonderful.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Thanks,” Harry said. “Come on inside, there is a house waiting to be shown – and champagne.”

Once she’d taken her jacket off, she asked, “Am I the first to arrive?”

Harry nodded. “Darius is known for being late and since Myra is probably riding with him—well, they’ll be here within a half hour at least.”

Draco waited in the living room. His and Hermione’s greetings were cold but civil and Harry looked upon it as progress. He took Hermione by the arm and showed her around the house as Draco put the final touches to the food.

Harry showed his bedroom with the adjoining bathroom, then showed Draco’s room briefly – Harry wasn’t sure of how happy Draco was about the thought of having people he considered strangers or close to it going through his room – and the living room, kitchen and lastly, they looked into what had been a garage and was now a construction place.

“The pool will be over there, with a shower here and we’ve chosen blue and white tiles,” Harry told her, bubbling with excitement.

“But what do you need an inside pool for, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“For Draco’s training, of course,” Harry said. “I’ve read about it in my books and they all say that water is the best way to get better after being paralysed.”

Hermione nodded. “I haven’t read much about it,” she said. “But it makes sense. The body feels lighter in water.”

“Yeah, so that’s why I’m putting this here. Besides, an inside pool could never hurt,” Harry grinned. “I need to start working out more anyway.”

“You look quite fine to me,” Hermione said with a devilish grin and Harry blushed crimson. “Those clothes really look good on you.”

“Draco picked them out for me,” Harry said, his face still red. “He said my taste in clothes was completely awful. Or, well, he said I didn’t have a taste in clothes at all. Something along those lines.”

“Well, there’s one thing I agree with him on,” Hermione said.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Hey!” Harry said. “Don’t you go ganging up on me as well. Draco already has Myra and D on his side.”

“D?”

“Darius. He’s—“ The doorbell rang, “—here.”

Harry hurried back out of the garage to the front door and opened it. Darius stood outside with Myra. Harry’s eyebrows rose and he went over to Darius, pretending to search for something.

“No little blonde thing hiding somewhere?” he asked.

Darius gave him an embarrassed grin. “No, not this time,” he said.

“I asked him about it too,” Myra said.

“Except she wasn’t as nice about it,” Darius said, sulking.

“I asked if he’d been replaced by an alien,” Myra said, shrugging. “Now can we come in? I’m dying to see this new house of yours.”

“Of course,” Harry said. “Welcome to Harry and Draco’s house.”

Hermione and Draco were at the other end of the hallway and Myra hugged Draco and greeted Hermione happily, then went about exploring the house, dragging Harry along with her. Darius, who’d only met Hermione once or twice at the hospital, was nice and formal with her, until she started joking with him. Then he loosened up and they seemed to bond quickly, as far as Harry could see. He only caught glimpses, of course, as Myra made him tell everything about the house.

Once Harry had shown Myra around the house, Draco presented them with the glasses of champagne, which they all gladly accepted.

Harry watched Draco, impressed with the way he hosted the small party, bringing them from the sipping of champagne to the table and the awaiting buffet.

“Harry, this tastes absolutely delicious,” Myra said.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry grinned. “Tell that to Draco; he’s the one responsible for most of the food on this table.”

Myra turned to Draco. “You really are a good cook, Dray.”

“Dray?” Harry said, choking slightly.

“He needed a nickname,” Myra said, “and he can’t go by ‘D’, because that’s already taken, and I didn’t think you’d like it if I called him Dragon, now would you?”

This time, Harry choked for real. “Um—”

“Why couldn’t she call you Dragon?” Darius asked.

Draco shrugged. Looking at Myra, who was smiling with an evil glint in her eye at Harry, he said, “Probably some private joke between those two.”

“Actually, I think ‘Dray’ is a good nick name,” Darius said. “Mind if I start calling you that too?”

“I may curse you into next Tuesday,” Draco said smiling angelically, “but you can try?”

This time, both Hermione and Harry started coughing at the same time. Myra and Darius both looked at them oddly.

“Curse me?” Darius asked.

Draco realised why they’d reacted as they had and smoothed it over, “It’s just an expression.”

Darius nodded, smiling as though understanding. “I may start using that too.”

Hermione was very nice and pleasant throughout the dinner. As her parents had both been Muggles, she had no problem understanding everything Darius and Myra talked about when they spoke of the university, of computers, cars – Hermione even owned one, after all – and other Muggle inventions. She offered stories of her own to the conversation and Harry noticed that Darius listened interestedly at everything she said. Myra was glad to have found a new friend who was just as interested in studying as she was.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Hermione was the first to leave, though, claiming that she had to be at the hospital regrettably early the next morning. The good byes were long as they were all quite intoxicated by then, but Hermione finally made it into the waiting cab.

Myra, Darius, Draco and Harry were left in the house and they ended up in the living room. Harry sat on one couch with Draco next to him, Myra on the other couch and Darius on the floor. As the hour became even later and more alcohol was downed, however, the seating arrangements became more and more un-ordered.

“You know,” Draco said drunkenly from his place lying with his head in Harry’s lap, “you three are really good friends.”

Myra giggled. “You’re a really good friend too,” she said, holding her glass up in a toast.

Harry just smiled happily, petting Draco’s blond locks slowly, as if that one action took all his concentration.

“And what am I?” Darius asked. “m I not a good friend?”

Myra giggled again, patting his head. “You’re also a good friend,” she said.

“But I don’t wanna be friends,” Darius whined. “I love you.”

Myra giggled. “I love you too.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “s a big ol’ I-love-you-party now, Potter.”

“Mhm,” Harry said, his eyes closed, continuing to enjoy the feeling of running his hands through Draco’s soft hair. He wasn’t quite as intoxicated as Darius and Draco were, but he still felt calmer than he should have, with Draco’s head on his lap, a bit too close for comfort to things that were getting—*hard*, especially as Draco wriggled to get comfortable. He hoped Draco wouldn’t notice, or if he did, that he wouldn’t remember it the next day.

At four in the morning, Draco was sleeping soundly with his head on Harry’s lap and Harry’s right hand on Draco’s chest. Myra was lying on her stomach, one arm over Darius’ shoulder, holding Darius’ hand. Darius was still sitting on the floor, a drunken smile on his face.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter seventeen*

### *Memories*

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Harry stirred first the next day. He opened his eyes slowly but quickly shut them again as the light assaulted his eyes and made his head pound. He couldn't quite remember the night before, which was why he was a bit startled to find that he was still sitting up, with someone lying on his lap.

As soon as Harry began moving, he moaned, "Ugh, my head."

Draco woke up from the sound and movement and he groaned, covering his eyes with his hands.

"I don't suppose you have a hang-over potion?" he asked, eyes still shut.

"Unfortunately not," Harry said. Then he added, confused but not unhappy, "why are you on my lap?"

Draco opened his eyes slowly and squinted up at Harry. "I think it has to do with the amount of alcohol we drank yesterday."

Harry considered this and nodded, then groaned. "Shouldn't move."

Draco gave him an equally pained smile. "Shouldn't drink."

They sat in silence for a few minutes while they grew used to their pounding heads and the queasiness. Myra and Darius both still seemed dead to the world.

"Why don't they get together?" Draco asked, turning slightly so that he could look at them.

"Because neither one dares to say anything to the other," Harry said.

"Should we play cupid?" Draco asked, a sudden evil look passing over his features.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“You?” Harry asked. “A cupid?”

“Why wouldn’t I be able to be a cupid?” Draco asked, pouting at him.

“Cupid are supposed to be nice little lovable things,” Harry said, grinning at him.

“Are you saying I’m not?”

“Well,” Harry said after thinking about it for a few seconds. “You are little.”

Draco brought his hand up and slapped Harry’s chest.

“Rude,” he said.

Harry grinned. “I learned from the best.”

“Oh, I feel so proud,” Draco said, rolling his eyes.

“Whoever said I was talking about you? Mione can be quite evil. Especially when teamed up with Ginny,” Harry said and Draco pouted again.

It was closer to half an hour before they managed to get off the couch. Myra and Darius slept on, oblivious to the world around them.

“One could think that we put a sleeping charm on those two,” Draco said, raising an eyebrow at the should-be couple.

Harry helped Draco into his wheelchair and they staggered over to the kitchen, where Harry put on a pot of coffee. Draco fetched the newspaper and they sat down by the dinner table, where dirty plates and glasses still stood. They had put most of it away the night before, but then the couch had looked more inviting.

“They’ve finally stopped writing about us,” Draco said, sipping his coffee and looking through the newspaper.

“That’s nice to hear, considering it’s over three weeks ago since it happened,” Harry said.

“They still haven’t got any idea who was behind it,” Draco continued, recalling the old articles he’d read. “Mona has disappeared from the face of Earth.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry shrugged. “It’s like finding the needle in the haystack,” he said. “No one’s got a picture of her, not even Espresso House where she worked, so the public can’t recognize her.”

“It’s strange,” Draco said, “that no one knows anything about her.”

Harry shrugged, more interested in getting rid of his headache than spending more time thinking about Mona.

Draco cocked his head to the side. “Do you think she’s a witch?”

At this, Harry’s head snapped up. “A witch?”

“It would explain why there aren’t any pictures of her,” Draco said. “She might even have gone to Hogwarts.”

“I doubt it,” Harry said. “She didn’t look more than nineteen or so and the police told you she’d been in psychiatric care for years. She couldn’t have been in both psychiatric care and gone to Hogwarts.”

“How is it that the psychiatric ward where she was doesn’t have a picture of her?” Draco asked, frowning. “Don’t they usually?”

“Not always, I suppose,” Harry said. “It seems they didn’t in this case.”

“She could have used a charm to make herself look younger,” Draco suggested.

Frustrated, Harry raised his voice slightly. “But why would she want to kill me? Why would she want to blow my apartment up? Whether she went to Hogwarts or not, she had no reason to—“

Suddenly, Myra stirred. She looked up from the couch and Harry immediately snapped his mouth shut.

“morning guys,” she said, her voice thick.

“Good morning,” Harry said.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Coffee?” she asked and Harry stood up to pour her a cup. As Myra got up, Darius woke as well. He rubbed his eyes, moaning.

“I’m never drinking again,” he vowed.

“Sure you won’t,” Myra said, rolling her eyes at him. “Mm, coffee.”

Myra and Darius both took showers and drank water, clearing their heads enough for Darius to be able to drive back to their flats. Harry and Draco were left alone in the house and both knew that a continuation of both the conversation of yesterday and the discussion they’d had earlier that morning was bound to happen.

Harry busied himself with cleaning away everything that had been left out the night before. He knew he wouldn’t be able to fool Draco, but he tried fooling himself that he was too busy; they didn’t have time to talk now.

“Harry, sit down,” Draco finally snapped from his place on the couch.

“You aren’t—“

“Ordering you around? Yes I am,” Draco said, annoyance apparent in both voice and face.

Harry opened his mouth to say something but closed it once he realised he had nothing intelligent to say. He sat down instead, raising an eyebrow at Draco, who smirked at him.

“Good dog.”

“Oh, shut up,” Harry said, relaxing.

They grinned, briefly, at each other. Then silence fell as they both wondered who would start.

“Why did you leave?” Harry asked finally.

Draco was quiet, studying his hands yet not seeing them at all. “A lot of things happened,” he said at last, his voice quiet.

A pause. “Tell me,” Harry said, just as quietly.

“I was accused of murder,” Draco said, looking up and meeting green eyes. “You know that.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Ron.”

Harry tried desperately to keep the memories back, to focus on Draco, but flashes of red hair and blue eyes passed before him, rolling over him like a tidal wave, unstoppable.

*...A broken body on the ground...*

Draco nodded, his eyes travelling back to his hands.

“But you were never – they couldn’t prove it was you,” Harry said. “And Professor Dumbledore vouched for you.”

Draco smiled ruefully. “I had some contact with Dumbledore after I left,” Draco said. “He was the one who told me to stay away, to stay hidden. It was too dangerous for me to come back.”

Harry just watched him, eyes wide. “Did you— were you—”

He couldn’t get the words out; they stuck in his throat, thick like glue.

“I didn’t kill Weasley,” Draco said and he looked like he wanted to get up and pace, back and forth over the floor, as though that would help. “But most of the Wizarding world didn’t believe that. And the people who did kill him were after me because I was a traitor.”

*...The wind made his messy hair even messier, blowing it into his eyes. Harry didn’t notice. All he saw was the white casket with a huge bouquet of flowers on top of it that was sinking slowly into the ground...*

“The Death Eaters,” Harry said thickly, tears filling his eyes at the memories of Ron’s funeral. It was too much, he didn’t want to think about it. He didn’t want to remember; he wanted to keep it down, behind the bars where it had been for the last five years. He didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to be reminded.

“My father,” Draco said and Harry had never heard his voice so cold.

*The newspapers screamed out the news: ‘Prisoners break out of Azkaban’*

*Lucius Malfoy was free.*

## *The Depths of Winter*

“What happened that night?” Harry asked despite the desperate voices in his head, telling him to not think about it, to forget it, to throw Draco out of the house and never think about any of the things he was telling him, ever again.

The other part of him knew that if he never found out, he would never find peace.

He desperately wanted peace.

“I asked Weasley – Ron – outside to talk to him,” Draco said quietly. “He accepted, after several minutes of persuasion. I wanted us to bury the hatchet. I can’t say I wanted us to be friends, because I doubt that we could ever have been friends. There was too much— just too much.”

Draco’s voice was just as thick as Harry’s, his head bowed as he talked, unable to meet Harry’s eyes.

“We went outside after dinner,” Draco said. “I didn’t want any of the Slytherins to overhear.”

A small, distraught laugh escaped him. “I never knew that my father had placed a spell on me as a baby and that he would always be able to ‘overhear’ my conversations as long as I was somewhere surrounded by magic. He knew I was betraying the Dark Lord. He’d heard me speak to Dumbledore, just as he’d heard me ask Ron outside. He told my mother somehow and she told Voldemort, who broke him and a few of the others out of Azkaban; apparently it fitted with his plans and he was now convinced of my father’s allegiances – and mine. Father was waiting for us, Ron and me, with Voldemort and six other Death Eaters, when we went outside.”

There was a brief pause, then Draco continued quietly, “They told me to kill him. To prove my alliances. They’d heard too many of my conversations; they knew I was on Dumbledore’s side.

“I couldn’t kill Ron, of course. So they— they killed him instead.”

Draco looked up, his eyes wide and shining with unshed tears. “They cursed him with curses I’d never heard before. He screamed— I stood paralysed. I— I couldn’t do anything—”

*Red hair, clashing with the grass... blood everywhere...*

*“It is too late,” the Headmaster told him. “He is dead.”*

## *The Depths of Winter*

*He is dead...*

Harry remembered. He buried his head in his hands; he didn't want to remember.

*"Anyone else sitting there?"*

First year, both eleven years old and on their way to the biggest adventure in their short lives – Hogwarts.

*"Are you really Harry Potter?"*

Nights spent at the Burrow, watching the players in the Chudley Cannon posters move around; laughing over a game of chess; fighting when the Tri Wizarding Tournament took place; sighing over homework; hating Snape with a passion.

*"What do you think of Hermione?" Ron asked.*

*"What I think of her?" Harry, being the thick-headed boy that he was, didn't understand the question. "Hermione is our friend. What am I supposed to think about her?"*

*Ron blushed. "Do you think – do you think she's, you know, pretty?"*

*Harry looked at him oddly for a moment, then asked, "Do you fancy 'Mione?"*

*Ron turned an even deeper shade of red. "No," he said defensively. "I do not."*

But he did and after that night, they both knew it. Them and the rest of the school – everyone but Hermione. Although Harry caught her staring at Ron every now and then with a dreamy look in her eyes.

Then he remembered tears. Blood and tears, mixed with dirt and a horrible feeling that it was all *wrong*.

*Hermione, standing next to him, grabbed his hand in a bone-crushing grip as the dirt was thrown on the casket. She turned her head away, buried it into Harry's shoulder as the casket was buried in the ground, shoulders shaking.*

*Harry could not look away, couldn't cry...*

## *The Depths of Winter*

And suddenly the walls broke.

The tears ran down his cheeks and he fell forward, to the floor, lying there, shaking as sobs wracked his body and his heart broke all over again. Tears that should have been shed years ago were finally allowed to flow freely and they did. Harry cried and cried, crystalline tears making his eyes red and puffy, pounding his hands into the floor, making them hurt; he didn't care. He only wanted the horrible feeling of complete anguish washing over him to disappear, to get an outlet.

He felt someone slide down next to him and pick him up, pulling him close. Words were whispered into his ears, words with no meaning but so reassuring, telling him that it was all right to cry, that it was okay to feel scared and little and not be the hero. Harry held on tightly, not caring, barely even remembering, that it was Draco who was comforting him. Draco kissed his forehead, stroked his cheek with gentle hands.

“Shh, it will be okay – just let it all out...”

Harry only took what was freely given; Draco's caring, gentle tone, the warm breath of another human being on his cheek. Harry relaxed against Draco, the tears still leaking down his cheeks, wetting the fabric of Draco's shirt.

Harry didn't know how long he lay there, held tightly against the other's chest, and he didn't care. He just lay there, letting himself relax, letting a strange sense of calm wash over him, letting Draco pet his hair, soothing him.

He must have fallen asleep in the end, because when he opened his eyes again, the room was darker and Draco was sleeping.

Harry had never felt so safe.

He lay completely still so that Draco wouldn't wake up. He remembered their conversation and his breakdown, the tears that he had finally shed, years too late.

He wondered why he'd let himself break in the company of Draco, rather than with Hermione.

Draco stirred, moving slightly. His eyes opened and he winced.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Am I that bad to wake up with?” Harry asked jokingly, his voice still thick.

Draco smiled softly at him. “Not at all,” he said, surprising Harry. “But my back is killing me.”

“Oh,” Harry said, sitting up abruptly. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Draco said. “It’s just not the most comfortable way to sleep.”

He attempted to get up on the couch, but failed as he wasn’t strong enough to pull himself up. Harry, who now sat on his knees before Draco, placed a hand on his knee. “Let me help you.”

Draco regarded Harry for a moment, searchingly. He nodded. “All right.”

Harry picked him up, placing Draco on the couch, movements gentle. He sat down on the couch at Draco’s feet.

“What happened then?” he asked, remembering where they had left off. The topic had been opened and needed to be continued and closed.

Draco also, obviously, remembered.

“They left us,” he said. Their voices were quiet, as though the subjects were such that they were best discussed softly. Maybe it was true. “Left him, dead – and they left me there to be found by the Professors and to be prosecuted as a murderer. They’d used my wand to kill him; it was all the evidence anyone needed, really.”

“But you left,” Harry said.

Draco looked up, eyes filled with sadness. He nodded. “The Headmaster was the first one out there. As I had already told him my plans to talk to Ron and I’d already helped him and the Order with details that not even Severus could get, he knew he could trust me. I told him what had happened; he told me to go.”

“Just like that?” Harry asked, disbelievingly. “After you risked your life for our cause, he just told us to go.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Draco looked down, then met Harry's gaze. "It was for the best. There was too much proof of my guilt if they found me with my wand next to Weasley, for even Dumbledore to be able to clear me. Without the wand, they didn't have any evidence at all."

"What did you do? Where did you go?" Harry asked. "How did you survive?"

"I— I stayed in the Wizarding world for a few months," Draco said, looking down again. "I never stayed at one place for more than a night or two. I didn't have any money. I got some help, but after several close calls with attempts on my life – both light and dark wizards were against me, after all – I decided to leave and go into the Muggle world instead."

He said it so matter-of-factly that Harry could barely believe that this was Draco Malfoy, the spoilt brat who hated Muggles and called Hermione a Mudblood.

"I still didn't have any money, but at least I could stay in the same place for more than two days in a row," Draco said. "I— I applied for a job at a café, one just like Espresso House, and I got it. I worked there for a little while, trying to scrape together enough money to leave England. I couldn't use magic; my father would know where I was immediately."

"Then the war ended when you killed Voldemort," Draco said. "It was, according to the papers, just like the night when you were a baby – the wizards and witches were out, even in the Muggle world, celebrating. I understood what had happened. I found a Daily Prophet."

Harry remembered.

*'Harry Potter defeats Voldemort!'*

*It was screamed from the rooftops; it was everywhere. His face was on posters, in the papers, in the magazines, on every wizard's or witch's mind. He was a hero, The Hero, their saviour.*

*It was suffocating.*

*Harry wanted nothing but to disappear, but the Wizarding world wouldn't allow him to go.*

*So he ran away.*

"I found out that my father had been captured and thrown into Azkaban again, along with most of the inner circle, except, of course, those who were dead."

## *The Depths of Winter*

*Ron, Sirius, McGonagall, Dumbledore, Fred, Seamus, Padma, Tonks, and so many, many more.*

*Magic killed; Harry knew it then.*

*He ran away.*

*Without the scar on his forehead – it disappeared when Voldemort was finally killed – it was easy to avoid being recognized. He let his hair grow out from the short cut he'd had for the war, he changed his glasses and often wore contacts. He escaped to the Muggle world and changed his last name.*

*“I knew I could stop running. But I found I didn't want to go back. It held too much of my past and I didn't want to be the person I'd been then.”*

*Pally found him and he stayed with her for the first few nights, until he managed to find an apartment.*

*Then he stayed inside, in his flat and just wrote. Wrote page after page until his first novel was finished and his hard-drive was filled with short stories. He let Pally read it and she took it to the publishers.*

*The rest was history.*

*“So I stayed in the Muggle world. I continued working at the café for a little while, but it bored me, so I tried other things. I worked in a store, a fashionable men's clothes-store – the one where we got you those pants, actually.”*

*Harry looked down, startled by the sudden tie to reality Draco had made.*

*“I stayed in different places, found apartments and stayed until they threw me out because I couldn't pay the rent. After the job in the men's store, I got a job at one of the small, local libraries, which is where I read your book the first time.”*

*“This is absolutely amazing, Mr. Evans. We would like to publish this.”*

*That was it; the book was published and Harry found himself back in the spotlight, though far less than he'd been in the Wizarding world. He kept to himself, was a private person. He filled his days with writing his second book.*

*Then he started studying and met Darius Alden.*

## *The Depths of Winter*

“I was offered a job at a publishing company. That was a year ago. I worked there, even enjoyed it sometimes.”

*School was school. Harry enjoyed being back in the Muggle system, learning Muggle subjects. He stopped thinking of them as ‘Muggle’ and began thinking of it as where he belonged.*

*He made friends with Myra Pryderi and her friend Candy Mignon.*

*He felt alive.*

“I was offered a job higher up just five months after being hired. I accepted, although it wasn’t what I wanted to do. But it paid well and it could be a fun job, at times. I got a pay raise and bought the motorbike and – well, I found a new freedom.”

He looked up. “The rest you know.”

*A motorcycle entered the intersection and the crash could not be avoided.*

*Harry saw as if in slow motion as the driver of the motorcycle was thrown to the side, landing on the ground with the motorbike over him. The driver of the car stood on the breaks, but couldn’t stop the vehicle from running over the man on the ground.*

*The sound of metal cutting into metal was deafening.*

*His mouth fell open and his eyes widened as he saw who the unconscious man on the ground was.*

*His world was turned upside down as he realised that it was Draco Malfoy.*

“I do,” Harry said.

The house was quiet, as though the world around them was afraid to breathe, suddenly. No sounds were heard; no birds singing, no electricity buzzing in the air. It was silent.

“Shouldn’t you have called your job and told them? Or did you do that?” Harry asked finally.

Draco looked as though he was about to say something sarcastic, but changed his mind. “It is strange,” he said. “The same day that I was in the accident, I had quit my job.”

Harry frowned. “Why?”

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Draco smiled slightly, a crooked grin. “Got into a fight with my asshole boss.”

Harry chuckled. The air around them was suddenly less loaded, less tense.

“I guess that some part of me knew that it was a day of new beginnings,” Draco said.

“Some new beginning, crashing into my life like that,” Harry said. “I wasn’t prepared for it. I was just going home that Wednesday afternoon to have a quiet night, studying and writing a little on my book. And then you came along.”

“You just wouldn’t leave me alone,” Draco said, smiling slightly.

“I have never had anyone scream ‘get out’ at me quite so many times.” Harry smiled back. It was an easy thing to do.

“Of course not, you’re Harry Potter.” Draco rolled his eyes. “But there has to be a first with everything.”

“I guess it does,” Harry said. “What happened to your apartment? I’m assuming you lived somewhere?”

Draco shrugged. “It wasn’t the best of places, if I put it that way. The landlord didn’t know much about who lived in the house – if you paid the rent you got to stay, if you didn’t, you were thrown out, so I’ll assume that it just ended when I didn’t pay.”

The silence spread again, comfortable like a warm blanket.

“Do you think whoever placed the bomb in my apartment intended to kill you, not me?” Harry asked.

“The thought has crossed my mind,” Draco said quietly. “That was why I was wondering if Mona could have been a student at Hogwarts. If she were, it would have been very possible for her to have a Death Eater for a friend or relative, or even a Light someone that she was getting back for.”

“You mean that she recognized me as Harry Potter when I came to the café?” Harry asked. “But she would have needed to know that you were staying with me.”

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“It is possible that she’d been watching me before that,” Draco said. “I don’t know.”

Harry nodded, pondering this new way of looking at the attack.

Draco’s stomach rumbled and he looked up, his cheeks red with embarrassment. “I guess my tummy is hungry.”

Harry laughed.

“What?” Draco asked, annoyed.

“You said ‘tummy,’” Harry said, still giggling like a girl. “I’ve never heard you say ‘tummy’ before.”

“What’s wrong with my saying ‘tummy?’” Draco’s irritation grew.

Looking at Draco, Harry only began laughing harder. “It – it sounded so – so cute,” he said between fits of laughter. “My t-tummy is hungry.” His eyes were tearing up; it felt so liberating to laugh.

“Potter has gone insane,” Draco muttered to no one in particular, but he was beginning to feel the same bubbling, free laughter build within him and a few moments later, he began laughing as well. Harry was clutching his stomach, tears of laughter rolling down his cheeks and Draco laughed with him.

It was a time for healing.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter eighteen*

### *Fly away*

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The next few days passed in more busy chaos for Harry. Classes during the days, but it wasn't fun anymore. It was only work and his motivation was lessening with every day that passed. He was seriously considering dropping out, so that he could spend his time writing his book and perhaps work instead.

Myra and Darius were both buried in class work with essays that had to be written and books needing to be read. Harry only saw them briefly between classes, but even then Myra usually had her nose in a book, busily studying. Darius, although not as serious about his schoolwork as Myra, spent almost as many hours on it. Harry wondered if it was to impress Myra.

In the late afternoon, Harry got home and talked to the construction workers that were building the pool, to check on the progress. It was proceeding nicely, on plan.

Then he went back inside and Draco usually had cooked dinner; it was something for him to spend his time on. They ate dinner in silence, as Harry was too tired to talk. He got the feeling that Draco desperately wanted to converse, but he couldn't gather the energy to do so. Halfway through the week, he longed for the weekend. After dinner, he went into his room and closed the door. He sat down by his computer and let his fingers run over the keyboard, weaving a story on the screen, until he was so tired that his eyes crossed. Then he realised he hadn't studied enough and he took out his books. He normally fell asleep on the books, by the desk, after fifteen minutes or so.

The weekend was booked in and full; Harry had two papers to write due the following week and another two books to finish. He took Draco out to dinner on Saturday, not knowing if the blond had been out of the house at all in the last five days.

"Do you want to walk or would you like to take a taxi?" Harry asked, massaging his temples to make the headache he'd gotten when he studied go away.

"If you're up to walking, I would enjoy being outside for a little," Draco said, watching Harry closely with what Harry thought might be concern in his eyes. "But only if you're up for it."

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Harry nodded. “A bit of fresh air will be good for me,” he said.

He packed away his books in his room and they both grabbed their jackets and shoes and headed out. Their pace towards the restaurant was slow and quiet. Harry seemed far away.

The restaurant was an Italian place that served mostly pizza and pasta. They ordered and had their food twenty minutes later. Draco watched Harry as he picked in his food, barely eating.

“Harry, are you sick?” he asked.

Harry looked up, pulled from his thoughts. “What? No, I’m not,” he said. “I’m just tired. Lots to do.”

Draco nodded slowly and continued with his meal. Harry’s thoughts went back to all the things he had to do the next day, before he went back to class on Monday. Class work, things for the house – calling Hermione perhaps? The work would continue on the pool; Harry wanted it done as soon as possible, so he paid the workers extra to carry on during the weekends. His book needed to be written. He had closer to a hundred pages by now and he felt the pressure on him. He’d left the old idea completely and was going with this new one; the new one that had flowed from his fingers so easily from the beginning but now seemed almost as hard as the other one to write.

Draco tried to engage him in conversation again, but he couldn’t keep his mind on one thing for very long; his thoughts kept drifting, stressing him and making him irritable. Finally they left the restaurant, full, but both very quiet.

Sunday came and passed; suddenly it was Monday and then came Tuesday. Harry went to the university while Draco watched him silently in the mornings and later when he came home. He’d made dinner again and Harry devoured it, his nose buried in a book the whole time. He had to continue to study. He was tired, but pushed it back.

He barely noticed Draco’s tries at getting him interested in talking to him.

He didn’t see the worry on Draco’s face as what he said seemed to pass Harry by completely.

Harry put the dishes away, his mind elsewhere. It drifted from the homework to his book and he disappeared into his room as soon as he could. He didn’t say anything at all to Draco;

## *The Depths of Winter*

didn't see the blond man's face fall as the door shut behind him yet again, leaving Draco out and alone.

Late that night, Harry still sat in his room by his computer, trying to type up the continuation of his story. His fingers just didn't seem to be with him, though, and his mind most certainly wasn't. It kept travelling away, to class work, to Myra and Darius, to— Draco. Now that he didn't have the other man before him, he couldn't help but think about him. It was not any truly coherent thoughts; more memories of what they had shared in the last two and a half months. Had it really not been more?

*A motorcycle entered the intersection and the crash could not be avoided.*

That had been the start of it, the re-introduction of his school nemesis into his life and, he had to admit, the first step towards healing.

*"I do believe you saved his life."*

*"Do I know you?"*

They knew each other, all right. And Draco – he'd been 'Malfoy' back then of course – had recognized him within moments, despite the lack of a scar and familiar round glasses.

*"Didn't I tell you to leave me alone?"*

He had. But then, when had they ever listened to the others' wishes?

*"Malfoy, what do you need to get well again?" Harry asked, voice urgent.*

*"A healer, of course..."*

There had been blind panic for him at those words. Fright; he didn't want to go back to the magical world.

*"This is where you live? What a dump."*

Had he ever expected anything but a sneer at anything that belonged to his life?

*A comatose Draco never responding...*

## *The Depths of Winter*

Waking up, living again. Harry had never understood why it had pained him so to see Draco like that; he still didn't. He only knew that it had seemed so wrong.

He recalled a morning on the couch in Darius' apartment, when the touches suddenly seemed so— electric. He remembered his own breaking down, crying on Draco's shoulder with soft words whispered in his ear, warm hands stroking his cheeks.

He was only just getting into the most recent memories when he heard a sound and his train of thoughts was broken. He stayed completely silent, listening to the night, but didn't hear anything. It was well past two in the morning; he should get to bed. His head ached from the lack of sleep.

He was about to get up when he heard the sound again.

"I've flown too high on borrowed wings..."

It was – someone was singing. *Draco* was singing.

Getting up quietly, Harry left his room, careful not to step on the wood that he knew creaked. Draco was not in his room; the door was open and the moonlight filtered in through the window.

"Beyond the clouds and where the angels sings..."

Instead, Harry found Draco in the living room, by the huge windows that showed their garden.

"In a sky containing no one but me..."

Draco's voice was soft, breaking at times. The rhythm was slow, gentle like the wind's breeze.

"Up there's all empty and down there's the sea..."

Harry found himself mesmerised by the way the moonlight made Draco's hair glow softly and the way his skin shone. He looked like an angel, or a sculpture.

"No one here but me."

Draco's voice broke with the last word.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry moved and to his horror, he heard the wood below him give a slight squeak. Harry held his breath, wondering if Draco had heard him. He hoped not; he wanted to hear more, see more. Draco was fascinating, just to watch.

And Draco did continue, his voice filled with emotions that Harry didn't recognize, couldn't place.

"I got to this place, arrived at last – in front there's the future, right back there's the past... Everything's moving so fast," he sang and Harry closed his eyes briefly, but he opened them again, not wanting to miss so much as one moment of this as he doubted he'd ever get the chance to see it again. Draco unguarded, his walls completely down, his soul naked and exposed. His voice reached Harry's heart like nothing had ever done before.

"The present like I've never seen it before, is this the right place to stay?"

Draco had closed his eyes, his arms tightly hugging his torso. Harry wondered how Draco would react if he went over and placed his arms around the other man.

It wasn't a surprising thought. It wasn't unexpected. It was what Harry knew was coming for them – he only hoped Draco was all right enough to accept it. Harry had fallen quite deeply for the blond man already.

The head ache seemed to have vanished as he slowly moved forward, wishing for Draco's silent grace rather than his own loud clumsiness.

"Please my wings, fly me away..."

Draco didn't seem to hear him. Harry wondered how it was possible – he was sure that the hammering of his heart could be heard from the other side of the room; it felt like it was beating a hole through his chest.

Draco closed his eyes. He looked like an angel in the blue moonlight – or perhaps he resembled a marble statue. It looked entrancing – unearthly. Harry wondered if he was right, if he was allowed, to disturb such amazing beauty.

Then he was suddenly up behind Draco. He raised a shaking hand and placed it on the pale shoulder. Draco jumped and whirled around, his eyes wide with fright and shock.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“I’m sorry,” Harry said quickly, “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Draco’s mouth was open; he was breathing heavily. “Don’t— you—” he began, but then blinked slowly and said, with a small shake of his head, “It’s okay.”

Silence spread. Harry’s hand remained on Draco’s shoulder and his heart kept beating rapidly against his chest. He swallowed nervously. Was it just him or was the air electric?

Draco turned back to look out the window. Harry placed his other hand on Draco’s other shoulder and got the idea to start massaging. As soon as he did, Draco let out a moan. Harry stopped abruptly, afraid he’d done something wrong.

“No, no,” Draco mumbled, “continue.”

Harry smiled slightly and did as he was asked. He let his hands run slowly over Draco’s tense shoulders, digging the heels of his hands into Draco’s muscles, feeling the knots there. He kneaded patiently, feeling Draco relax, bit by bit, under his ministrations. Every now and then, Draco let out a moan.

“Yes, that’s— oh—”

Becoming braver, Harry’s hands began running down Draco’s arms and back, a bit further each time, letting Draco get used to the idea of Harry’s hands on his body. He didn’t quite seem to mind.

Once Harry was done with Draco’s shoulders, he moved around and stood before Draco. He picked Draco’s right hand up and began massaging his palm. Draco’s eyes snapped open as he began, but then slowly shut again because Harry was quite good at giving massages.

“Mm,” Draco mumbled.

As Draco relaxed again, Harry brought Draco’s fingers up to his lips. Ever so slowly, he placed a kiss on the inside of Draco’s hand.

“Harry,” Draco breathed, eyes snapping open again. “What are you—”

“Shh,” Harry said, trying to sound cool and self-assured when he was a nervous wreck inside.

“But—”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Then Harry leaned in and placed a kiss on Draco's lips. It was just a gentle pressing against each other, getting a first taste of the other. Harry's heart beat even quicker, starting to break when Draco began to pull away, but then mending and expanding when Draco leaned in again and began responding to Harry. The kiss was slow and sweet, with a promise of more, much more, in the future. For now, they were content in just finding that they could have each other.

"But nothing," Harry whispered, his forehead resting against Draco's, when they finally pulled away.

"You— we—" Draco said, his eyes wide and his lips slightly redder than usual.

"Yes," Harry said, smiling. "*We*."

Then Draco finally smiled back at him and Harry felt his heart melting.

"Don't fly away," Harry whispered to him, cupping Draco's face in his hands.

Draco looked down, the long lashes shadowing his cheeks. When he looked up again, he said, his voice close to breaking, "I'll try not to."

"Good enough," Harry said. "Now, how about a bed?"

Draco smiled slightly and nodded.

\*

Wednesday morning dawned, the sun hidden behind a layer of clouds. It looked damp outside, the grass wet and the air humid.

Harry woke up, his throat feeling dry and awful and his body aching. He forced himself out of bed, slightly shaky as he made his way to the bathroom. After a quick shower, he felt refreshed and better and he hurried out to the kitchen to eat. He knew he had class in a little while. He tried to be quiet as to not wake Draco – he wanted badly to see him but knew Draco needed sleep.

## *The Depths of Winter*

His imagination quickly supplied him with pictures of Draco sleeping. Eyes closed of course, mouth slightly open, his face relaxed and younger-looking, blond hair falling down over his forehead and his pale body hidden beneath the covers. Harry smiled at the image and fought the urge to go in and wake him up, just to get a morning-snog in.

Waking from his daydreaming, he realised that he was standing with a cup of coffee in his hands and almost dozing off. He quickly put the cup away, went to brush his teeth and left the house. He'd taken the bus to the university every morning since moving to the house and found he missed the walk he was used to, but then there was not much to do about it as it would take closer to forty-five minutes for him to walk to the university from the house.

During that bus ride, Harry sat and remembered the night before. He'd helped Draco back to his room and they'd kissed some more until both Harry and Draco were half asleep. Harry had returned to his own room. They hadn't spoken of it, but sleeping together seemed too far a step to take so soon after this new development.

Myra and Darius greeted him with their usual energy when he arrived at the university and Darius launched into telling them both about the date he'd been on the night before. Harry kept quiet about his and Draco's new relationship although he saw Myra peer curiously at him.

Harry also wondered if Myra noticed that despite Darius' grins, the happiness was really lacking.

\*

Arriving home that night, Harry was excited to see Draco again. He was nervous – how were they going to act now? Yet at the same time, Harry knew, somehow, that it would be all right. They would be fine. It would need work, their relationship, but their relationship had always needed work, no matter what level it was at.

He unlocked the door and closed it quietly behind himself. He took his jacket and his shoes off and walked into the house. Draco was not by the TV, nor in the kitchen. Harry looked into their rooms but found both empty. Both bathrooms were empty as well.

Breathing hitching slightly at the thought of something having happened, Harry hurried through the house to the garage and threw the door open.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Two men looked up; the construction workers Harry had hired.

“Hey,” one of them said.

Harry didn’t have time for greetings. “Have you seen Draco?”

Both men shook their heads. “Haven’t seen ‘im since this morning,” the one who had greeted him said.

“Did he say anything?” Harry pressed on. In his mind flashed pictures of Draco; hurt and lying on a street somewhere; kidnapped and held against his will by some madman; in the hospital, burns over his body—

Negative headshakes again. “No, nothin’. Why? ‘s he missing?”

“I— I don’t know yet,” Harry said, his heart racing as the images came faster and faster before his eyes.

“Well, we’re done here,” the man said, standing up and brushing his pants off. “We’ll be back again tomorrow. Around eight thirty, as always.”

Harry nodded, not registering a word. He didn’t care if they were back at eight thirty the next day. He only wanted to know where Draco was.

He turned and closed the door to the to-be-pool area, breathing quickly. He began coughing and he had to hold against the wall for support as a wave of dizziness washed over him.

Straightening up again, he headed for the phone. He hit the quick-dial for Myra.

“Hello?” she said.

“Hi, Myra, it’s Harry.”

”Hey Harry—” she began but he interrupted her.

“Have you seen Draco?”

## *The Depths of Winter*

On her end of the phone, she frowned. “No, of course not,” she said. “I haven’t been home from Uni for more than half an hour. Why? Is there a problem?”

“N-no, I just— he’s not here and I’m wondering where he is,” Harry said.

“He could have just gone out,” Myra suggested gently to him. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

Harry nodded although she couldn’t see. “Yes. Yeah, of course he’s all right,” he said, more to himself than to anything else. “Why wouldn’t he be?”

“Harry? Are you all right? You looked a bit sick today – you’re not coming down with anything, are you?” Myra sounded concerned.

“No, I’m fine,” Harry said, lying but not caring. *He* was not what he was worried about right now; he wanted to know where Draco was. “I’ve got to go.”

“Call me when he gets back,” Myra said and he could hear her slight smile. “Just so that I know you’re not worrying and getting yourself sick.”

“I will,” Harry said. “Bye.”

She had barely said good-bye before Harry had put the phone down. He stood up from the couch, where he’d sat down to avoid more dizziness, and made his way out to the hallway, where he put his jacket and shoes on. He grabbed his keys and opened the door, only to find—

Draco.

“Hey,” he said, wheeling himself up the ramp they’d built over the one step up to the front door. “You going somewhere?”

Harry stared at Draco. The panic inside him began to dissolve and the adrenaline left his body.

“What is it?” Draco asked, frowning slightly at him.

“Where were you?” Harry asked.

## *The Depths of Winter*

The frown on Draco's face deepened. "I was out," he said. "I am allowed to leave the house, right?"

Harry only started. When his heart had calmed enough, he nodded, swallowing. "Of course," he said hoarsely and he was horrified to find that he was close to crying with relief that Draco wasn't injured or abducted or worse.

He turned and ran to his room, where he slammed the door shut behind him. Well inside, he stood, his chest heaving and hurting. He felt dizzy and he sat down. Tears of— *something* burned in his eyes but he refused to let them fall.

A soft knock on the door startled him although it shouldn't have.

Draco opened the door and wheeled himself inside with little problem.

"Harry? Are you all right?" he asked, slowly coming closer to where Harry was sitting on the side of the bed.

"I'm fine," Harry said, although it sounded choked even to his own ears.

He should have known better than to think Draco would leave him alone.

"Yes," Draco drawled, "I can see that – sitting on your bed, looking close to tears about something, all red-cheeked and angry. I'm sure you're fine."

"Draco—"

Draco came closer and placed a hand on Harry's arm.

"Just— don't," Harry said, his voice suddenly weak, the energy once again draining out of him.

"Don't what?" Draco asked, his voice gentler now, like a man handling a wild animal. Harry didn't feel too far off with that description; he certainly was an unreliable animal – he didn't even know himself how he would react to things. Draco's hand stayed on his arm and the blond slowly inched closer.

"Don't just leave," Harry said.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Draco frowned at him again, cocking his head to the side. “Is that what this was all about?”

Harry didn’t answer; he didn’t have to. Draco knew it anyway. He shook his head slightly, laughing softly. “You are so strange sometimes, Harry Potter,” he said. Then he bent forward and kissed Harry gently, letting their lips meet slowly. It felt like heaven to Harry and his heart finally began slowing down again.

When they broke apart, Harry looked down at his hands, unable to meet Draco’s grey eyes and gentle smile.

*“Beautiful, are they not?”*”

He recalled Hermione’s words and they made him look up for some reason. Green eyes met silver and Harry’s world stopped. There was such understanding in those eyes. Understanding, laughter, sadness— love?

Another coughing fit brought the moment to an all too abrupt end. Harry doubled and clutched his chest. He suddenly felt hands on his back, rubbing slowly, and a voice speaking to him. The voice was calm, but panic lay beneath the surface.

“Lay down, Harry,” Draco mumbled to him. “Shh. Lay down and relax.”

Harry let himself be pushed down on the bed and the coughing fit slowly eased. Hands massaged his left shoulder gently, relaxing him.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were sick?” Draco admonished him softly. “You shouldn’t have been in classes today.”

Harry remained silent, Draco’s words fading until only his voice was left and he let that voice lull him slowly to a safe, secure sleep.

\*

The following days were hell for Harry. He’d caught the flu and it was just as bad as everyone who’d had it had always told him. The fever he’d gotten on the first day stayed and left him in a hazy dream-state most of the time. Between the fever-highs, he was tormented by shaking chills and headaches and a runny nose and— he *bated* being sick.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Draco took care of him, something for which he would be eternally grateful. He made him breakfast and served it to him in bed, brining the plate with him in his lap to Harry's bed. He forced Harry to drink ridiculous amounts of water and he forced tablets down Harry's throat.

"You're lucky you're not part-Veela," Draco said, smiling slightly at Harry in one of his more coherent moments. "I wouldn't be able to take this medicine at all."

A look of horror passed over Harry's face. "What if you catch it?" he asked, sniffing as his nose was running. Draco handed him a tissue.

"Can't, won't," Draco assured him. "One of the things I owe my father for. He made sure that I am protected against the usual Muggle- and Wizard-illnesses."

"But at the hospital – you were sick," Harry said. "Mione said that it was some regular Muggle illness."

"My entire immune system was failing because of the Muggle medicines and the shock my body suffered during the accident. The spells my father had placed upon me were failing just as much," Draco said, stroking Harry's hair gently.

"Well, then, you can perform a spell like that on me any time you want," Harry said. His body ached horribly and he felt the tiredness sweep over him again. He would be asleep again soon.

"You've left the Wizarding world behind," Draco reminded him. "No magic?"

"There can be— exceptions," Harry said, yawning.

Draco pulled the cover up over Harry. "Sleep," he said.

As though Draco had performed a spell, Harry was asleep. Draco bent down and placed a light kiss on Harry's feverishly damp forehead. Harry smiled slightly in his slumber.

Draco stayed home while Harry was sick, watching over him like a mother would her sick child. He pulled the blankets to cover him when he'd kicked them in his fever-induced heat and he put a cool cloth on his head to make him relax when the fever went up yet again. He soothed Harry when nightmares suddenly started taking over his sleep, making him remember more than he cared to of his last years at Hogwarts. He didn't want to remember, didn't want the nightmares.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry barely left his bed; only to go to the bathroom and on Saturday night, when Draco forced him to go in and take a shower.

Coming out of the shower, Draco had made his bed – how, Harry would never know, but Draco was amazing at what he was able to do, even confined to the wheelchair – and taken out new pyjamas for Harry to wear. As he held out the clothes to Harry to put on, Harry realised that Draco liked taking care of him. There was something in the gentleness in his voice, in the way he touched him, calmed him.

“Thanks,” Harry said suddenly, his voice quiet and his eyes steadily resting on Draco.

Draco looked up at him, surprise evident. “What for?” he asked.

“This,” Harry said, motioning towards himself and the bed and the glass of water on Harry’s nightstand. “For— taking care of me.”

Draco allowed a small smile to grace his features. “You are quite silly. Why wouldn’t I do it for you? You did it for me.”

“Payback?” Harry asked, slightly disappointed that it was only a return of favours.

“No,” Draco said, “Being a friend.”

“Just a friend?” Harry asked.

Draco cocked his head to the side. “Being yours,” he said after a moment.

“Mine,” Harry said, bending down and kissing Draco briefly.

When they broke apart, both were smiling; Harry’s grin was the widest. Then another bout of shakiness had Draco forcing him to lie down again.

Draco left the room, saying he was going to make dinner. Harry closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep within minutes.

*He was back at Hogwarts, in the huge Great Hall. It was filled with people but it was far from a happy occasion. Screams and death hung in the air, spells and curses flying through the air. Wands vibrating from the raw powers moving in the room.*

## *The Depths of Winter*

*Harry stood facing Voldemort while his friends died around him to ensure that he would be able to break the Dark Lord. He was in a full Body Bind, unable to move.*

*"I have waited for so long to kill you," Voldemort hissed at him.*

*The rage that had been growing within Harry ever since Ron's death – no, since Cedric's death – increased, filling him with darkness and making him see red. He didn't listen to what Voldemort was saying, instead he focused all of his powers inwards.*

*Harry remembered blinding light.*

*He never understood why there was light when all he felt was darkness.*

*When he woke up again, he was in the Infirmary – or what was left of it.*

*Hermione was crying next to him.*

*The scene around him changed to one of the many funerals he attended after the final battle.*

*The twinkle in Albus Dumbledore's eyes disappeared, his eyes staring unseeingly before him, his white beard stained by blood and dirt.*

*Minerva McGonagall falling not far from her Headmaster, her face contorted in pain.*

*He saw the short ceremony where Severus Snape was appointed as the new Headmaster. They hadn't decided who would be the new Deputy Headmaster or mistress.*

*"Just do your best, Harry. No one can expect anything more from you," Remus Lupin told him. Harry saw him fall, in a mission a month before the final battle. A silver bullet through his heart – blood and pain and agonizing howls.*

*And yet Moony was one of the ones who'd told Harry that he didn't fear death. He'd be with Padfoot.*

*"When the war is over, I'm going to ask Angelina to marry me," Fred Weasley told him and then he fell down, dead, more blood mixing with that already on the floor.*

*Percy Weasley stood before Harry, "First years this way, please!"*

## *The Depths of Winter*

*And then he too was dead.*

*The Weasley family suffered more than most – the horror when Molly and Arthur found the Dark Mark on Percy’s arm.*

*They came before Harry at a more rapid pace: Terry Boot, Padma Patil, Ernie Macmillian...*

*Seamus Finnigan had died months earlier, before Ron. “D’you reckon we’ll ever win this war?”*

*No...*

*Harry didn’t answer and Seamus wore a surprised look when a dagger was placed through his heart.*

*Ron Weasley, red hair contrasting vividly against the green ground and clashing with the blood.*

*...so much blood...*

*The walls of his dreams were all a deep red...*

*There were not many people left in school. The halls felt strangely empty; Harry felt himself floating through the halls. The sun shone in through the large windows but the scene was black and white, the people around him having lost all their colours, their essences.*

*The panic grew within his chest.*

*Hannah Abbott, smiling at him and then more pain.*

*Dennis Creevey, walking next to his brother and blood suddenly pouring from his mouth and nose and ears as a curse caused his heart to break...*

*He was back outside, the images of people long dead still flashing before him. He would reach out to touch their faces, to prove them as real and not gone, and they would disappear, like smoke dissolving before his eyes.*

*He felt the tears in his eyes burn but he wouldn’t let them fall.*

*Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, taunting him and in the next second, they lay dead on the floor of the Great Hall.*

## *The Depths of Winter*

*Never one without the other; Harry thought it to be fitting when they were both found dead, mere feet away from each other.*

*Nymphadora Tonks came before him, her hair blue and her face smiling contently, waving, “How do you like my hair today?” only to turn into a grimace of pain and death.*

*Dedalus Diggle smiled and greeted him, then keeled over, hit in the back by the Killing curse.*

*“This is one of the new protection spells the Ministry are testing out,” Kingsley Shacklebolt told him and suddenly blood started pouring from wounds all over his body.*

*The Great Hall was a mess of blood and destruction and death.*

*It was cleaned off before Harry was allowed in there, but he could still see the dead bodies on the floor, necks turned in unnatural angles, faces contorted with pain and fear. He could still smell the blood and death in the air. He could still hear the screams echoing in the air, slicing through him like a thousand knives—*

*Hermione came up behind him, tears flowing freely down her cheeks.*

*“Harry,” she said, putting one hand on his shoulder.*

*He turned away from her and left.*

*He was alone in something big and huge and black and scary – but at least it was empty, void of feelings and people and then no one could get hurt and he wouldn’t hurt.*

*Suddenly the blackness disappeared from beneath his feet and he felt himself falling...*

*...down...*

*...dead...*

*He closed his eyes and wished for his journey to the other side would be swift...*

*...he hoped he would see Ron soon again...*

*Someone was shaking him, gently but urgently.*

*“Harry, wake up, it’s only a dream.”*

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry opened his eyes, feeling disoriented and tired, his body aching.

He was met with the sight of an angel before him. Pale hair, pale face, graceful features: Draco.

“I’m okay,” he said, his voice hoarse, tired, closing his eyes again.

“You were shaking and moaning in your sleep,” Draco said, concern evident. “What did you dream about?”

Green eyes looked up to meet silver as Harry contemplated telling Draco. “The final battle,” he mumbled finally.

Draco’s features relaxed into understanding. “I see,” he said softly.

“There were so many who died, Draco,” Harry whispered. “Fred, Padma, Hannah, Terry— McGonagall— Dumbledore,” The last name was barely audible.

Draco reached forward and surprised Harry by cupping Harry’s cheek in his hand. Harry relaxed with the touch. “I know,” Draco said. “It was— awful.”

“You weren’t there,” Harry said. “You couldn’t possibly—”

“I heard stories,” Draco said. “Even if I were in the Muggle world, I couldn’t avoid the stories. I read the Daily Prophet.”

“A lot of Slytherins died too,” Harry said his voice thick with sadness. “Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle— Pansy Parkinson. Almost everyone in your year and many of younger students too.”

Draco moved closer to Harry, still stroking his cheek. “You couldn’t have saved them.”

“I— no, I couldn’t,” Harry said, bitterness suddenly lacing his voice. “I couldn’t even save Ron.”

Harry noticed the flash of pain and guilt passing over Draco’s face, wiping off the gentle smile. Draco pulled his hand back. “I’m sorry.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry frowned for a second, then shook his head. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about. Your father is rotting away in Azkaban and Voldemort is dead, so Ron is— avenged.”

“It doesn’t really help, does it?” Draco asked, his face looking strained.

“No, it doesn’t,” Harry said quietly. “It won’t bring him back.”

Draco looked down, avoiding Harry’s gaze. Harry wondered what was up with the blond man; why was he acting as though— oh. He thought it was his fault that Ron was killed. Guilt, that was the feeling that was radiating off Draco in strong waves.

“Draco,” he said letting the tenderness he felt towards the other man show. “Come here.”

Draco looked up, eyes widening in— fright? Amazement? Harry couldn’t place it.

A few seconds of fumbling followed, as Draco moved from the wheelchair to sit stiffly on the side of the bed, keeping his distance from Harry. Harry smiled slightly when Draco wasn’t looking. He pulled himself up to a real sitting position, despite protesting muscles and an aching head.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Harry said softly, making Draco turn to face him. “You didn’t kill him. You wanted to be his friend.”

“And that killed him,” Draco said with a harsh laugh. “Some friend I am.”

“You are a great friend,” Harry said, his voice a bit more heated than before. “Look at you right now. Taking care of me. You make food for me and see to it that I drink enough. You— you hold me when I break down and you laugh with me when I’m happy— You are absolutely...”

He trailed off, as Draco looked at him, eyes still wide. Harry wondered if it was the light in the room playing with him, or if there were really tears shining in Draco’s eyes.

He pulled Draco towards him, hugging him and holding him. Draco seemed to hold his breath for a moment before relaxing in Harry’s arms. He let his head rest on Harry’s shoulder, closing his eyes. Harry wrapped his arms around Draco.

*“Beautiful, are they not?”*

## *The Depths of Winter*

She had no idea, Harry thought as he looked down at Draco who was taking deep, shuddering breaths against Harry's chest. The blond hair fell into his eyes, shimmering in the light. Pale eyelashes, making shadows appear. Pink lips, full and soft.

"You are strong, wonderful, amazing," Harry said quietly and Draco's breath hitched, the hands holding the fabric of Harry's pyjamas tightening. "You don't let anything get you down. You're tied to a wheelchair but you refuse to let it bind you. You continue to live although you think it's hard. You listen when I rave about classes and Hogwarts and— everything else. You have become friends with my friends. You saved my life. You— you are incredible. You are— everything."

He finished in a mere whisper, reaching up to pull a lock of hair out of Draco's face. When he did, he saw a lone tear trail down Draco's cheek.

"I'm not any of those things," Draco said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "I wanted nothing but for death to claim me when the accident happened. I have wanted nothing but to die ever since my father and Voldemort forced me to leave the Wizarding world behind."

"But you haven't died," Harry countered. He kissed Draco gently, his hand staying on the pale cheek. "You're here, living, fighting."

Draco looked up at him and Harry almost gasped at the sadness he saw in Draco's grey eyes. Draco's walls were down; this was him, totally and completely.

"But it's so hard."

Harry held Draco tighter. "I know it is. Life is hard— I've learnt that much. But— there isn't much we can do about it but to continue fighting anyway."

"You're just feverishly delirious," Draco said, hiding his face in Harry's chest.

Harry ran a hand through Draco's hair, marvelling at how soft it was to the touch. "Shush. I'm not delirious. I'm feeling much better, because *you* have been taking care of me." He paused and watched Draco carefully. "You don't always have to be strong," he said softly. "I'm here – I can help you. You don't have to do it all by yourself."

"But what about when you're not there?" Draco asked pulling back to look at Harry. "When you leave?"

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry pulled Draco to him again, closing his eyes briefly before meeting grey ones. “I’m not going to leave,” he said softly. When Draco opened his mouth to protest again, Harry placed gentle fingers on his mouth. “Shh,” he whispered and leaned in to capture Draco’s lips again. Draco’s lips were soft, warm. Harry was gentle, letting his tongue trail Draco’s lower lip, making him whimper and press closer. When they broke apart, Harry was smiling softly at Draco.

“I’m not going to leave and I’m—“ He repeated but then he stopped and yawned. He let out a small laugh. “And I’m obviously tired,” he said.

“You should sleep,” Draco said, smiling slightly back at him. “We shouldn’t have had this discussion right now at all.”

He made to move over to his wheelchair and leave, but Harry caught his wrist. “Just— stay with me,” he said. At Draco’s frown, he added, “Please?”

Draco opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it. Harry slid down to a half-lying position again and Draco slowly lay down next to him, wrapping his arms tightly around Harry, spooning him. Harry sighed, content, and snuggled closer. He hoped that the nightmare wouldn’t repeat itself if Draco was there with him. If nothing else, Draco would be able to wake him up.

“You still have a fever,” Draco told him, putting a hand on his forehead. “You’re burning up.”

“Hm,” Harry said, half way off to sleep. “That might explain why I’m so sleepy.”

Draco nodded and reached out to turn the light off. Then he lay down again, placed a light kiss on Harry’s shoulder and then they slept.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter nineteen*

### *Future*

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Harry awoke slowly, feeling strangely content despite how his body ached. When he felt Draco move next to him, he was surprised by just how nice it was to have someone in bed with him, even if they hadn't done anything but sleep during the night. It was a long time since he'd last shared bed with someone else. Years, in fact.

When Harry had left the Wizarding world behind, he had been too messed up to be able to have a real relationship. That didn't mean he hadn't tried, of course, and in the spring, six months after leaving the Wizarding world, Harry had had several shorter relationships that had all ended badly. He had been almost like Darius, dating anyone on two legs, getting them to bed and then dumping them.

Pally – his agent and first friend in the Muggle world – had been the one to make him stop. She'd threatened to drag him to a psychologist, but Harry had refused. He didn't want to bring all the crap he had with him back, least of all with a Muggle shrink with whom he would never be able to be honest. He wanted to leave that life behind him and *not* deal with it, that was the point of leaving magic behind. That was why he'd packed all of his magical possessions away in a locker at the bank, except for the one set of robes he'd kept with him. He didn't know why he kept the robes; he just needed something that didn't have magic but was part of *that* world anyway.

Draco shifted slightly next to him.

His mouth was slightly open and he was curled up next to Harry, his head resting on Harry's shoulder. Harry looked down at Draco's legs, hidden beneath sweatpants. They never moved, save for the occasional spasm; they were just— there.

He hoped that the pool would be done soon. He hadn't been out of bed long enough to go look at it since Thursday, but Draco had promised him that it was coming along and that the construction workers were saying it would be done in a matter of days. Harry would have Draco start training in it as soon as it was done.

## *The Depths of Winter*

That reminded him – they had to go look for good workout machines to have in the workout area Harry had made space for. Harry had told himself that he would start working out, back when Draco had still been in the hospital, and although it hadn't happened yet, he still intended to do it. And, of course, the workout room would have equipment for Draco to get better.

He let his thoughts still and just lay there, enjoying the moment. He rarely did that, especially in the last few weeks. He'd been too busy with classes and everything else.

He felt calmness wash over him. Sunlight filtered in between the closed blinds, casting the room in a misty glow.

Draco moved again, raising his head. "G'd morning," he said sleepily, rubbing at his eyes.

Harry thought he looked adorable and he smiled at Draco.

"You look better," Draco observed, sitting up and moving his legs over the side of the bed. "Not so much of the sickly pale skin and all."

"Sickly pale skin?" Harry asked, letting a laugh escape. "If pale skin means you're sick, then you've been sick since I first met you."

Draco glared at him. "You know what I mean, Potter," he said.

"Oh, we're back to last names, are we? Well, then, *Malfoy*. Did you sleep well?" Harry was still smiling.

Draco rolled his eyes at Harry. "I did, actually. But now I'm hungry."

"Is your tummy hungry?" Harry teased him, relishing in how much better he was feeling. Draco took one of the pillows and threw it at Harry.

"Not funny," he pouted.

"Yes, funny. In fact, hilarious," Harry said. He grabbed Draco's wrist and tugged, making Draco lose his balance and fall back on the bed. Harry grinned widely at him, bent over him and kissed those delicious pink lips until they were red and swollen. Proud of his accomplishment, he pulled back, panting. "Come on. Let's make some breakfast."

## *The Depths of Winter*

“You certainly know how to talk dirty to someone,” Draco said, rolling his eyes and sitting up.

Harry grinned and got off the bed. His body was still a bit weak and his muscles protested against moving around so much, but they didn’t protest quite as much as Draco, who growled when he climbed over him. “I think I preferred you sick.”

“Yes, yes,” Harry said. “Learn to live with your disappointment.”

“Ha, ha.”

“You’re really not a morning person, now are you?” Harry asked, cocking his head to the side.

“Your powers—“

“—of observation astound you,” Harry finished for Draco. “Yes, I know, they astound me too sometimes.”

“All right, that’s it,” Draco said. “I am *never* taking care of you again when you’re sick if this is how you thank me.”

Harry grinned at him, kissed him yet again and then he held the wheelchair still as Draco lifted himself off the bed to it. They left Harry’s room and went out to eat breakfast.

They discussed what kinds of workout machines they should buy during breakfast and then they continued on with light topics like food and university.

“You know,” Harry said, frowning, “I’m going to be even further behind in classes now.”

“Why do you go to school still?” Draco asked him, sipping his coffee.

“Because it’s something to do,” Harry answered immediately.

Draco raised an eyebrow at him. “That doesn’t seem to be a very good reason for doing something full time. You should enjoy what you do, at least if you have the chance to chose.”

“What do you suggest, that I quit?”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Draco shrugged. “Why not? Looking around here, it’s obvious that you have more than enough money to live well anyway.”

Harry was about to reply, but then realised that he didn’t have any good reason anymore. He’d had a good reason before, three years earlier when he first started going there. He’d wanted something to do and he’d wanted to meet new people, find new friends. But now? He had the friends; he didn’t make the effort to get to know anyone else anymore. Myra and Darius were the best friend he could ever want.

It was Harry’s turn to shrug. “I don’t know.”

Draco shook his head at him. “Then why do you continue?”

Harry frowned. “Because...” He trailed off, taking the cup of coffee to his lips. “I don’t know that either, I guess.”

“Quit?” Draco suggested.

“I can’t just quit,” Harry said, aghast. “What am I supposed to do with my days instead?”

Draco smiled slightly at him. “You’re an author – if nothing else, you should write,” he said. “Otherwise, you can apply for a job somewhere. Talk to that publisher of yours; see if you can work there. Or apply for some brain-less job somewhere. At a café – heck, you could even work at McDonald’s.”

Harry pulled a face at the prospect. “I rather think not.”

“Then just be home for a while. Finish that book of yours – I can see in your face that you want to finish it right now,” Draco said.

“You see that in my face?” Harry asked. He was surprised; he hadn’t known Draco knew so well about his book and his fervent wish to be able to finish it within the original deadline set by the publishers. They had given him some extra time, but with all the ideas and the involved plot Harry had come up with for the book, he only wanted to sit down and let the words pour out of him—

“I can see it now,” Draco smirked. “You’re thinking about that book and the characters and the plot and what’s going to happen.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry blushed, wondering if he really was that obvious and when Draco had become so good at reading him.

Draco continued, “So quit Uni and finish the book and then figure out what it is you want to do with your life.”

Harry cocked his head to the side. “And what do you want to do with your life?”

“Me?” Draco looked taken aback that Harry had asked him a question. After a few moments of silence, he said, quietly, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t want to continue with publishing?” Harry asked.

Another smile ghosted over Draco’s features. “Nah,” he said. “I told you, I’d quit earlier that day.”

“So what do you want to do? If you could choose anything in the world, what would you do?”

Draco looked uncomfortable. “I don’t know,” he repeated, looking down at his place rather than meeting Harry’s gaze.

It suddenly dawned on Harry just why Draco was so unwilling to share his dreams with Harry.

He didn’t believe that he would ever get the chance to fulfil them, because he was bound to the wheelchair.

A surge of tenderness for the man before him came over him.

“We’ll make you walk again, I promise,” Harry said, his voice quiet yet strong, the promise forceful.

Draco’s head snapped up at the words. “Don’t say that,” he said quietly. “Just— don’t.”

But Harry had made up his mind. Draco *was* going to walk again, no matter what lengths they had to go through to get there. He reached over to Draco and squeezed his hand briefly, reassuringly. Draco looked up, sad silver orbs meeting determined green ones. Harry offered a gentle grin and Draco gave a weak smile back.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“You could always start that café Myra suggested,” Harry said.

Draco just smiled slightly at him. They finished their coffees in silence.

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Later that day, Harry cleaned his room. He had decided that Draco’s idea to quit studying was a wonderful idea. He was bored by it and there was no reason left for him to stay there. Although he was a bit uncomfortable with dropping out, just like that in the middle of the term, he knew from the smile that found its way to his lips all the time that it was the right decision. He would go to the university tomorrow and tell them.

Thus, it wasn’t the normal cleaning of dusting the shelves off and vacuuming it – although he actually did that, too – that Harry did. Instead, it was him putting his university books away. It felt like such a relief to place them in the bookcase, knowing that he wouldn’t have to look at them again unless he wanted to do so.

Draco watched him with an amused smile. “You look like a kid on Christmas,” he said. “Is it really that much fun to put books away?”

Harry grinned widely, nodding. “I don’t have to look in these books again unless I want to,” he said happily.

“You’re insane, you know that? Did the idea of dropping out never occur to you before?” Draco asked, shaking his head.

Harry stopped in mid-motion, cocking his head to the side. Thinking for a few seconds, he then shook his head. “Nope. Never occurred to me.”

“You’re lucky to have me,” Draco muttered and Harry smiled widely.

“Yeah, I am,” he said and bent down and kissed him. He was getting quite good at stealing kisses every other minute. “Very lucky,” he said when he pulled back and then he continued to put his books away and dusting off the shelves as he went.

Draco stared wide-eyed at him, his mouth slightly open, but Harry pretended not to notice.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry called Myra as soon as he was finished in his room.

“You are *quitting school?*” she practically screamed at him and he winced.

“Um, yeah,” he said. He figured this would probably be the hardest part of dropping out.

It sounded as though she had one of those closed-eyes-and-shaking-head moments as she asked, “Why?”

“Because I’m bored?” Harry squeaked.

“You just suddenly realised that?” she asked.

“Well— I was so far behind after, well, you know, the fire and all,” Harry began, stumbling over the words in his haste to explain himself. “And then I got sick and now I’m going to be even further behind. It’s not fun anymore.”

“And I’m guessing you want to write?”

“Err, yes,” Harry said.

“Yes, I’ve seen it in your eyes,” Myra said. “You get that faraway look in your eyes when you’re plotting your stories.”

“Am I really that easy to read?” Harry asked, frowning at her although she couldn’t see.

“Yes, dear, you are,” Myra said.

They continued to talk for a bit longer, before Myra told him, “I need to get back to studying. Unlike some others, *I* can’t drop out just like that.”

“Um, no, I guess not,” Harry said. Then he grinned evilly and added, “But you could just marry Darius instead and be a home-wife and you won’t have to worry about such petty thing as education.”

“Harry Evans!” she exclaimed, sounding horrified. “Even if I were to marry someone wealthy, I would never give up my own career. I am *not* going to be a perfect little home wife.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“But you wouldn’t say no to marrying Darius, hm?” Harry couldn’t help but tease her. Besides, this was a good way as any to find out if she felt anything beyond friendship for Darius.

“Err— what are you talking about, Harry?” Myra asked. “I’m not going to marry Darius. We’re not in love with each other, why should we marry?”

Harry noted that Myra didn’t sound too horrified with the concept, despite her words. He wondered what she would say if Darius actually dared to ask her out at some point.

“Oh I’m just joking with you,” Harry said, grinning.

“Sometimes I don’t understand your sense of humour,” Myra muttered.

“Only sometimes?”

“How are things going between you and Draco?” Myra asked, abruptly changing the topic.

“Good,” Harry said honestly. “He’s been taking care of me while I’ve been sick.”

“I guess you found him on Thursday?”

Harry blushed. “He’d been out,” he said. “Came back just a few minutes after I talked to you.”

“And?” Myra prompted.

“And nothing,” Harry said, deciding that she didn’t need to know everything just yet. It was his, his and Draco’s, and he wanted to keep it that way for just a little longer. Myra would find out sooner rather than later anyway. “We talked for a bit and I got sick and since then, he’s been playing maid.”

“Told you he’s a softie,” Myra said, laughing.

“Whatever,” Harry said, though his tone was fond. “Weren’t you going to study?”

“Oh, right,” Myra said. She paused for a second. “Can you come over for dinner?”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Tonight?”

“Yeah,” Myra said. “It’d be nice to talk to you two again. I haven’t seen you since Thursday. It’s way longer than I can go without my Harry-dose.”

They both laughed again and they agreed that Harry and Draco would come over for dinner at seven. Then they hung up, so that Myra could return to her studying.

Late that afternoon, Harry and Draco took a taxi into central London to shop. Draco had ordered books and DVD’s on the internet, but they still spent closer to an hour walking up and down the aisles of a huge book- and music-store. CD’s of all kinds – soundtracks, rock ‘n’ roll, pop, classic, techno, rap – went into the basket and Harry found several books that he’d been meaning to read but hadn’t had time to.

“Anything you like, just take it,” Harry said to Draco, trying to reassure him that he didn’t care about the money. They hadn’t spoken of money since they’d— gotten together? Were those the words for it? Was Draco his boyfriend now? It certainly felt like it and Harry wanted it. He wanted to call Draco his boyfriend. He wanted to call Draco his.

He saw Draco wheeling himself up and down the aisles, choosing a CD here and there. Harry in turn went over to the DVD’s and chose a few that he’d been planning on watching.

By the end of the hour, they had both filled up their baskets and Harry paid for the stuff. Draco went through the bag of movies in the taxi on the way back.

“*Lord of the Rings extended version*?” he asked. “I guess I should have known, since it was one of the first books you bought. *The Matrix*? – I haven’t seen it.”

“You haven’t seen *The Matrix*?” Harry asked, pretending to be horrified. “That is a crime!”

“Yes, yes,” Draco said, waving him off. “Whatever. You just got the DVD; I will be able to watch it whenever I want, won’t I?”

Harry grinned and nodded, satisfied.

“*My best friend’s wedding*, *You’ve got mail* and *Pretty woman*? Why on earth did you buy those?”

Harry shrugged. “Need something mindless sometimes.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“*Charlie’s Angles*’. More mindlessness. As with the collected ‘Bond’-movies. Gah, are you actually intending to *watch* these?” Draco asked, shaking his head. “You won’t have any brain cells left.”

“You mean to say that I have brain cells now? That’s a compliment, coming from you,” Harry said, grinning.

Draco ignored him, continuing on the movies. “*The Lion King*’. Finally a good movie. The ‘*Terminator*’-movies. Right. Enough said. Moving on.”

And so it went. Draco went through every single one of the movies Harry had bought and he had some kind of comment for all of them. Harry enjoyed listening to him; it was a fun way to spend his time. He looked briefly through the music Draco had picked out. It truly was a variety of CD’s; even a few artists that Harry had never heard of. He would have a wonderful time listening through the CD’s, finding new favourites.

The taxi drove them to their house and Harry took the folded-up wheelchair out, helping Draco into it and paying the driver.

“We need to buy a car, I think,” Harry said. “It’ll pay itself sooner or later, considering the costs of the taxi. Besides, the taxi is inconvenient—”

“Do you even have a license?” Draco asked.

Harry glared at him. “What, nervous about riding with me?” he asked. “I have had my license since I was twenty, thank you very much.”

Draco rolled his eyes at him. “No, why would I be nervous about riding with a former Gryffindor, who’s known for acting first and thinking later?”

Harry sent him a mock-glare. “I’ll have you know that I’m a very good driver,” he said indignantly, walking before Draco up to the front door.

He’d just put the keys into the keyhole when he heard the rustling of leaves. He whipped around, eyes scanning the front yard.

“What is it?” Draco asked, frowning at him.

Harry didn’t answer; his eyes continued to look around to find something out of the ordinary.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Harry?” Draco’s voice held both annoyance and uncertainty.

“There is something—” Harry mumbled.

Just then, he heard the rustling again and he saw a figure move. Harry moved cautiously forward towards the bush. He stretched his hand out and slowly parted the leaves to find—

“Mona?”

The shock he felt was obvious in the way he said her name.

She looked up at him from where she was crouching, her face dirty and scratched. Harry didn’t think those scratches were made only by the branches of the bush.

“Harry? Who is it?” Draco called uncertainly, frowning at him.

Harry gripped Mona’s arm securely and she winced at the touch, her eyes widening. “No, no,” she whimpered, “I can’t be seen—”

“You’re wanted by the police,” Harry said to her, his voice shaking and continuing to drag her up from the bush. “They think you’re the one behind the bombing of my apartment.”

Her eyes widened again, filling with tears. “That wasn’t me,” she whispered, looking as though she might cry. She seemed scared, frightened of something around them, because her eyes kept darting away from Harry, to where Draco sat in his wheelchair and beyond. “Please, let me go,” she whispered.

“What are you doing here if you didn’t want to talk?” Harry asked.

“Can we go inside?” she asked. “I can’t stay— I’ll be found—”

“Who’ll find you?” Harry frowned.

“I—”

Whatever she was going to say was cut short, because a whisper travelled with the wind and chilling blue light hit her in the back, so bright that Harry let her go. She crumpled to the ground, holding her hands to her chest, screaming in pain.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry stared.

He knew that whisper on the wind, that one chilling whispered word—

He knew that blue light.

Most of all, he knew the curse to break the heart – literally...

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter twenty*

### *Adamas aperio*

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Harry kept staring wide-eyed as Mona kept screaming before him. He stretched his hand out to touch her, but an object flew through the air and tumbled itself in Mona's hair. It was a small, white flower and—

—and in the next second, Mona was gone. A drop of blood fell to the ground where she'd just been, falling as though in slow motion through the air and hitting the ground without a sound.

Harry backed away slowly, his breathing heavy and his mind in shock.

“Harry?” Draco asked, eyes as wide as Harry's. “What— what happened to her?”

“She was hit by a curse,” Harry said faintly, staring off in the distance at where Mona had just been.

“What curse?” Draco asked.

Harry whirled around at the question, his mind coming back to reality. “The Adamas curse,” he said, his voice suddenly serious and stressed. “Get inside!”

He opened the door and helped Draco inside, almost throwing him in inside in his haste. He locked the door, his hands shaking.

“We need to call the police,” he said, looking around for the telephone.

Draco stared at him. “What are you going to tell them? That Mona was here and that she was hit by a curse and that she then was transported away from here with a Port Key? Because that was what it was, wasn't it?”

Harry looked at him, Draco's words processing through his brain. “Well, what do you suggest we do instead? We can't do nothing— we can't just—”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Harry— we need to go to the Aurors,” Draco said softly. “The Muggle police can’t handle this anymore.”

It was like someone was letting the air out of a balloon; Harry’s shoulders slumped forward, his head suddenly became heavy as he closed his eyes and he sank down on the couch. Draco came over, placing a hand gently on Harry’s shoulder. Harry looked up.

“I don’t want to go back,” he said. “I left— going to St Mungo’s was hard enough—”

Draco came up to him and took his hand. “I hate to tell you this, but you don’t have a choice.”

“You don’t hate telling me that at all,” Harry muttered.

Draco smiled slightly at him. “I thought we’d moved past that now.”

“Yeah. Right. As if we ever will,” Harry said, looking up. He sighed, nodded and gave Draco a weak smile.

“Look on the bright side,” Draco said gently. “They may not recognize you. No scar, your glasses aren’t the same—” He frowned, cocking his head to the side. “But you can’t walk around in those clothes, because then everyone will stare at you anyway.”

Harry chuckled, the sound not quite happy because his throat was dry. “Well, you picked them out.”

“Hm, yes, I did, didn’t I?” Draco sounded rather proud. “Now, let’s have dinner before we do anything rash.”

“Dinner?” Harry’s head snapped up. “Oh, crap, what time is it?”

“Six twenty,” Draco said after consulting his watch. “What’s the problem?”

“I promised Myra we’d eat dinner at her apartment at seven,” Harry said.

Draco shrugged. “Forty minutes. Lot’s of time to get there.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry paused, running his hand through his hair. “Merlin, what are we doing?” he said, feeling his heart beat hard against his chest again. “Mona was just *cursed*, right in front of us and we have no idea if whoever did it is still outside the house – we could be attacked the moment we step outside. We don’t have our wands— we can’t ward the house— and we’re just *standing here*, talking about going to Myra’s house for dinner like it’s nothing— like Mona wasn’t just murdered— like everything is—”

“Shh,” Draco said, moving closer to Harry and taking his hand. “We don’t know for sure that she’s dead. And Mona was talking about someone. That someone was after her, her only. Not us. If whoever cursed Mona wanted to curse us as well, then that person would have done so right then and there.”

“How do you know that? *Someone* is after us— *someone* blew my apartment up, with you in it. Maybe they just had to get Mona out of the way— maybe they’re still waiting for us—“

“They’re not,” Draco assured him. Harry didn’t question how he knew it, because he knew that Draco didn’t have any proof behind his words, and it was better for Harry to pretend that Draco *did* have proof.

Falling silent, Draco squeezed Harry’s hand gently. Harry closed his eyes, willing his heart to slow down.

After several long minutes, Harry walked into his room to change and get ready for dinner. He ignored the way his hands kept shaking.

He allowed himself to get immersed with the project of getting ready in such short time, trying desperately to forget what had just happened. It didn’t work; in his mind, Mona’s desperate, dirty face kept coming back to haunt him.

*“Can we go inside? I can’t stay— I’ll be found—”*

*“Adamas aperio.”*

The words, like a whisper riding on the wind. Blue light, crashing into Mona, making her fall to the ground, screaming in pain. Blood already started pouring out of her nose, her mouth— One drop fell to the ground just as a white flower landed in her hair and took her away.

Harry wondered where he would have been taken if he’d reached for Mona a second earlier.

## *The Depths of Winter*

He wondered if she was still alive; he didn't know anyone who'd survived the curse so he didn't believe it— but why had she been taken away? Why had someone gone through the trouble of first cursing her and then removing her from Harry's presence?

The answer was obvious – Mona had information that someone didn't want Harry to get his hands on. Besides, the curse could have been traced to reveal the caster.

But who was the caster? He had more enemies than he cared to think about in the Wizarding world. Former Death Eaters that had escaped conviction, Death Eaters' children, wives, families – all out for revenge. Even wizards and witches on the side that they called 'Light', who blamed Harry for their beloveds' deaths. Harry had been the hero; some seemed to think that this was the same thing as the saviour and that no one on the side on which Harry fought would die.

How wrong they were.

That had been proven back in fourth year, already.

*"Kill the spare."*

The hatred had begun growing then, the hatred and darkness that finally destroyed the Dark Lord in the last battle. It had been growing inside of him for years, perhaps ever since the first time he heard about Voldemort.

And now someone wanted to kill him again.

But then, perhaps not. What if they were out to get Draco, not Harry? Draco had been hiding for years, afraid to re-enter the Wizarding world. But since living with Harry, lots of people had found out about him, seen him and talked to him. Harry didn't even know if Draco had gone by the name Draco Malfoy before the car crash.

When considering that it could be someone out to kill Draco, the list of enemies grew even longer and Harry found himself with a headache just thinking of it.

"Harry? Are you ready?"

Draco's voice brought Harry out of his reverie, startling him. He had somehow managed to get dressed; he wore tight blue jeans and a white, button-up shirt with three quarter-sleeves.

## *The Depths of Winter*

He attempted to comb his hair, but it fell messily over his head no matter how much he tried, so he gave up.

Draco was waiting for him in the living room. Harry's breath caught when he saw him; Draco looked *good*. He was wearing black, tight pants – it wasn't leather; some other material that Harry didn't recognize – and an ice-blue polo. His hair was combed and neatly pulled back. Not slicked as it had been back in school; just out of his face. He wore a silver necklace with a small dragon charm on it that Harry had insisted on getting when he'd seen Draco looking at it.

Draco raised an eyebrow at him. "You look good," he said. "Of course, even you couldn't mismatch the clothes I picked out for you," he added, smirking.

Harry rolled his eyes, the knot in his stomach loosening slightly. He walked over and bent down, kissing Draco on the lips, letting him know just what he thought about Draco. Draco didn't seem to mind the attention; he wrapped his arms around Harry's neck and deepened the kiss, letting their tongues war and taste each other while his hands ran through his hair.

Harry finally pulled back, breathless. "Ready to go?"

Draco nodded, looking thoroughly kissed and quite dazed. "I called a taxi. It'll be here in a minute or two."

"What if—"

"No one will be waiting to curse us outside," Draco said, squeezing Harry's hand briefly.

Yet even with Draco's assurance, Harry stayed inside, looking out through the small window on the side of the door until the taxi came. He ushered Draco out quickly once it arrived, thinking that whoever had cursed Mona might not curse him and Draco while a Muggle was present.

During the taxi-ride, Harry kept looking out through the back window to assure himself that no one was following them, until Draco placed a hand on Harry's leg and with a meaning look told him to stop.

Five minutes later, Harry and Draco were outside of Myra's apartment. Harry looked at the stairs and – thankful for the new 'problem' to think of – smiled wryly. "I guess we'll have to do a repeat-performance of what we did at my flat," he said and picked up Draco in his arms.

## *The Depths of Winter*

He noticed, quite pleased, that Draco seemed much more comfortable with it than the last time Harry had carried him up the stairs. He just let Harry carry him, no blush creeping over his pale cheeks and no angry glare directed at him.

Myra lived on the second floor. Harry wondered how they'd gotten Draco up and down the stairs when Draco had stayed over with her back when Harry was in the hospital. Of course, with it being only two flights of stairs, it wasn't too hard to carry Draco. He was still light in Harry's arms and Harry supposed he'd been even lighter back then. Harry also didn't doubt that Darius had helped them.

Another few minutes, they were safely inside Myra's apartment.

"Oh, you both look absolutely gorgeous," she'd grinned at them when they entered the small apartment. "Here, let me take your jackets. Draco, you have my full gratitude for making Harry dress in a way that doesn't make me think he's completely colour blind."

"Colour, shape and fit-blind," Draco corrected her with a smirk at Harry.

"Hey!" Harry said indignantly but Myra just nodded. "I have a feeling this night will be very long," Harry muttered to himself and the other two laughed at him.

Myra had made a simple dinner; sliced potatoes and chicken with a fairly hot peanut-sauce on the side. It was delicious, which wasn't unexpected since Myra was famous among her friends for that particular sauce and her talents on making the most of chicken.

Harry watched Myra and Draco interacting, his own mood warring between extreme happiness about his relationship with Draco and the dark thoughts and questions of what had happened to Mona earlier. Draco on the other hand seemed more than able to forget about what had happened in the afternoon. He was very pleasant and lovely towards Myra and it was obvious that they got on well. They talked and laughed like old friends, despite only having known each other for a few weeks.

The dinner stretched out and they moved to the couch, Harry opting to sit on the floor instead, as the couch was only big enough for two. He didn't mind; he sat back and listened, smiling slightly, as Myra and Draco went through subject after subject, often disagreeing quite loudly on different points.

When the clock struck eleven and all three were yawning, Harry suggested that they head home.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Why don’t you sleep over instead?” Myra asked. “One of you would have to sleep on the floor, of course, but—”

Draco smirked at her. “You want to see us in your pyjamas, is that it?”

“Well,” Myra said, smiling angelically at him, “that would be kind of hard since you didn’t *bring* your pyjamas, wouldn’t it? Thus, seeing you naked is *so* much more of an interest to me.”

She giggled when she saw Harry and Draco’s shocked expressions. She shrugged, still giggling. “Is Darius the only one who is allowed to talk about sex?”

“That— you— what?” Harry said, not recognizing this side of Myra.

“Oh, come on, Harry. Shut your mouth, you look like a goldfish.”

Harry snapped his mouth shut and glared at her.

They did end up sleeping over. Draco curled up on the couch while Harry was in the bathroom. When Harry came back out, Draco was asleep. Harry watched Draco with a soft, content smile on his lips, standing in the doorway to the combined kitchen and living room. He walked over and placed a gentle kiss on Draco’s lips. Draco opened his eyes briefly and smiled slightly, before falling back to sleep.

Harry stood up again.

“Got something you want to tell me?”

Myra’s soft voice startled him. He whirled around to face her. She was standing in the doorway with a smug smile on her lips. When he didn’t say anything, she said, “You care for him.”

“Isn’t that pretty obvious?” Harry asked, careful to speak quietly as to not wake Draco up.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“We— it just happened,” Harry said, walking over to her where she was standing in the doorway. “I just realised that he was more than just—”

## *The Depths of Winter*

She smiled. “Good,” she said. “I’m glad you realised now; I was afraid it would take you years to figure out.”

“You knew?”

“Oh Harry,” Myra said, shaking her head, her smile still in place. “Of course I knew.”

“Did he—” Harry began, but she cut him off.

“No, he didn’t say anything. I just watched you, both of you. It was written in your eyes. Besides, you fit together, in some strange way.” She paused, then said, “There’s been something else on your mind tonight.”

Harry was startled by the change of subjects and he looked down, studying the floor. “Something happened before we came here. I— I can’t tell you all about it, because— well, I just can’t.”

She regarded him carefully for several long moments, her expression soft. “What did you do before Darius met you, Harry?” she asked, but continued as though she wasn’t expecting an answer. “Draco won’t tell me anything either, although it’s obvious that he knows. What is it that is so bad that you don’t think that we’ll be able to handle it?”

She trailed off, still looking at him. Then she shook her head. “I guess we’ll find out in time. Or we won’t. But Harry, I want you to know that whatever it is, I will still be your friend. Draco knows and he still—” She trailed off, uncertainly. “I don’t think it’s all that bad, whatever it is.”

Harry listened, feeling his heart swell at knowing he had such wonderful friends. “Thank you,” he said, his voice just as soft as Myra’s. “I hope I will be able to tell you one day.”

Myra smiled and handed him the blanket and pillow she’d been holding.

“Good,” she said, turning to go into her room. “Good night, Harry.”

“Good night, Myra.”

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## *The Depths of Winter*

Myra woke them up at seven as she started making breakfast for herself.

“Sorry, but I need to eat,” she said, not looking the least bit sorry as she continued making noise. Draco and Harry winced at the sound and wished they were back in the house so that they could sleep in however long they wanted.

Both realised that they wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep, so half an hour later, the three had finished eating breakfast. Myra admonished them both – Draco for eating too little, Harry for eating like a pig.

“Really,” she said, “you still eat like you’re three years old.”

“What do you know about my being three years old?” Harry asked, smiling angelically at her. “Perhaps I was very well behaved back then and I need to act out my childish qualities now.”

It was actually close to the truth, but he wouldn’t admit that; Myra would take it as only teasing. She did. “Yeah, right,” she said, shaking her head.

Harry and Draco left together with Myra after having called a taxi. She waved them off, turning to walk in the other direction towards the university.

“So, how does it feel to not have to go to classes all of a sudden?” Draco asked, watching him carefully.

“Quite wonderful,” Harry said, smiling. “The only thing I need to worry about is my book, now.”

“What is it about?”

“The book?” Draco nodded. “I— It’s—” Harry hesitated. The book was personal. The others had been too, but this one was even more so.

Draco cocked his head to the side. “What is it with that book and your inability to tell me about it?”

Harry attempted a smile at him. “It’s just very personal.”

Draco harrumphed at him.

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“I think it’s better if you read it yourself when I’m done with it,” Harry said nervously. “That way I don’t have to explain.”

Draco looked up at him, still scowling slightly at him. “All right,” he said at last, making it sound like he was the one giving something up.

When they got back to the house, Harry went to see the construction workers. They had their own key so that they could let themselves in when Harry and Draco weren’t home, since Harry wanted them to continue working every day of the week. It was paying off, he saw as he walked into what had been the garage.

The tiles were up – mostly white, with a line of grey-blue tiles going around the room and black details here and there – and the shower had been finished a week back. The windows they’d put in made the room look more spacey and lighter. The room was almost finished.

“Hey,” one of them greeted him and Harry felt bad that he hadn’t even learnt their names.

“Hey,” Harry replied. “How is it coming along?”

“We’re just doing the final touches,” the same man said. “The electrician is coming in an hour to fix the lamps. I’m guessing you’ll be able to take your premier bath tomorrow, Mr. Evans.”

Harry smiled, pleased with the report. “Sounds good,” he said.

Staying behind for a few more minutes to watch the two workers continue their jobs, Harry then came back into the house. Draco was on the couch in the living room, listening to music.

*Just the way we are  
I guess you've seen it now*

The girl’s voice was soft, frail yet strong, like an angel’s. The slow song was sad, the lyrics deep, yet they hit strangely close to home.

*A mirror of ourselves sure makes us weird  
Falling down*

Draco looked up at him, smiling slightly. He sang along with the lyrics, his voice just as soft

## *The Depths of Winter*

as the girl's. There was some emotion surrounding him, but Harry couldn't tell what it was. Sadness? Not quite. Not anger, not happiness – longing, perhaps? Although for what, Harry couldn't fathom.

*From a mountain of frights*

*What's there to hold on to?*

As the last of the song played out, Harry wondered what he was going to say. He wanted to say something important, something deep. Yet all that came out was, “Sad song.”

“Not really,” Draco said, breaking their eye contact and turning the player off before the next song began. “It's a song of understanding. Of course, her lyrics are up for interpretation, I guess.”

“Who is she?”

“Lene Marlin,” Draco replied. “From Norway, I believe.”

“She's good.”

Draco nodded.

“The pool will be finished tomorrow,” Harry told Draco. “They're just putting in the finishing touches now.”

Draco looked at him, a strange cross between gratitude and sadness on his face. “That's— nice.”

He didn't need to say more; Harry understood.

Harry sat down on the couch next to Draco and gathered him close, kissing him gently before settling to just hold him. Draco sighed, quite content in Harry's arms.

The strange mood broke when Draco suddenly began moving. He said and stretched out and pulled the wheelchair to him. “I'm going out,” he said and moved from the couch to the chair quite gracefully. Harry wondered if there was anything Draco didn't do gracefully.

“Where to?”

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Draco smirked slightly, reminding Harry of the Draco he knew in school. He had a hard time putting the two characters together as one; the asshole from school and the man he'd just held in his arms. "That's none of your business, Potter."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Fine. When will you be back?"

Draco shrugged. "Later. Before five."

Harry was surprised that Draco would be out for so long; he wondered where the blond was going. But he didn't have time to figure it out right now; he had to go to the university to tell them that he was quitting. Then he would have to call Darius and Pally, he supposed. Darius because he was his friend and Pally because she liked knowing what was going on in his life.

He took the underground to get to the university, opting not to take a taxi when Draco wasn't with him. It was possible for them to take the underground with the wheelchair but Harry wasn't a fan of big crowds and Draco was still getting used to the wheelchair. Over all, it was easier for them just to take a taxi.

Midmorning, the crowd on the underground wasn't as big as it would be later in the afternoon, though, and Harry let his thoughts drift to his book and its plot and characters. He almost forgot to get off the underground when it reached his station, but luckily he was roused by the lady next to him, who was also getting off at the station.

He walked the rest of the way to the university and an hour and a half later, he was back on the underground, a free man.

The house felt strangely empty when he returned. Harry had gotten used to having Draco always be home when he got back from classes, which was why he'd panicked like he had when Draco hadn't been there the last time.

Harry wondered where the blond man spent his days when he wasn't in the house.

He watched the construction workers and the electrician who had arrived and studied the structure they had brought in, the one that would help Draco in and out of the water. Getting bored after a few minutes, Harry returned to the living room where he pushed play on the CD-player.

*Your words cuts rather deeply,  
they're just some other lies*

## *The Depths of Winter*

*I'm hiding from a distance,  
I've got to pay the price defending all against it*

It was that same sweet voice again and Harry looked at the CD, curious. *Lene Marlin: Playing my game* it said on the blue CD cover, next to a picture of a pretty – of course – and quite young-looking girl. Harry looked through the track listing as the song continued playing. He stopped at the fourth song.

*Flown away*

Could it be—? Harry quickly pushed ‘next’ until he reached the fourth song.

It sounded like wind and soft piano.

*I've flown too high on borrowed wings,  
beyond the clouds and where the angels sing*

Harry listened as though in trance. It was *that* song. The song Draco had been singing.

*In a sky containing no one but me,  
up there's all empty and down there's the sea.  
No one here but me*

Harry, who hadn't realised that he'd closed his eyes, opened them to look over at the window, where Draco had been sitting when he sang it.

*“You care for him.”*

*“Isn't that pretty obvious?”*

Since Myra knew, it wouldn't be long before Darius knew. Although Darius had pulled away from her since falling in love with her, they still had no secrets from each other – other than that one, of course. Darius would know. Harry wondered how he would react.

*“Beautiful, are they not?”*”

Ridiculously gorgeous was more like it. Pale, perfect skin, soft hair, grey eyes that would grow darker with anger or shine with happiness. A body that still looked incredible, if a bit frail, despite the wheelchair.

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He shook his head, wondering just when he'd fallen so hard.

He sat down, picked up a book of his and began to read, unable to concentrate enough to write more on his book.

Several hours later, Harry heard the door open and close and Draco came into the living room.

"Smells good," Draco said, nodding toward the food Harry was making; potatoes, roast beef, vegetables, sauce.

"It'll be good," Harry replied, trying to ignore the way his heart beat just a little bit faster when Draco looked at him.

Draco suddenly noticed the music playing in the background. "You found one of my favourite CD's, I hear," Draco said.

"It was in the player and I just put it on. I like it," Harry said. He bent down to kiss Draco. "It reminds me of good things."

Draco smirked into the kiss.

Draco sat down by the dinner table and watched Harry cook in silence for a few minutes. Finally, he said, "We need to go to the Aurors."

Harry winced. "I know."

"When?"

Such a simple question. Harry didn't want to answer.

"I— tomorrow?" Harry asked.

Draco nodded. "We should have gone today, or even yesterday, but I suppose tomorrow will be good enough," he said. "I'm just going to make a phone call."

Ten minutes later, Draco was back and dinner was served. They ate in silence, both deep in thought. Harry was worried; he didn't want to return to the Wizarding world yet again. Going

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back to St Mungo's to fetch Hermione when Draco had been sick had been bad enough – going into the Ministry to talk to the Aurors – that was just something Harry didn't want to so much as think about. With or without his scar, he would be recognized – especially as he would have to state name and reason for wanting to speak to the Aurors. Then he would be back in Hell.

Draco touched his arm and Harry was startled out of his thoughts and memories.

“It'll be okay,” Draco said, looking directly into his eyes. “You'll be okay.”

Harry closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them again, he nodded briefly and attempted a small smile. Draco squeezed his arm in return.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter twenty-one*

*Auror Johnson*

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The street where the telephone booth entrance to the Ministry was situated was just as dingy and shabby as Harry remembered it. Draco followed Harry closely, watching Harry carefully for any signs of the raven haired man wanting to flee the scene. Or, rather, as there were quite a few signs of that, he was looking for signs of Harry actually doing it.

Harry swallowed before dialling 62442 and the welcome witch's voice sounded through the booth.

"We're Harry Ev— *Potter* and Draco Malfoy and we're here to see an Auror," Harry said, his voice wavering.

Two buttons plopped out and the booth began sinking through the ground. Draco reached up and squeezed Harry's hand, watching the distraught man worriedly. Harry opened his eyes and offered Draco a small, forced smile.

They walked past the Fountain of Magical Brethren and to the elevators, where Draco pushed the button for the second floor, not trusting Harry's shaking hands to hit the right button.

There were fewer Aurors now than when Harry had last been here, during his seventh year, he noted. Several rooms were empty. The floor seemed less busy than it had been and much more neat.

"Harry – Harry Potter?"

Harry turned around, almost wincing at the name.

A tall, black woman stood behind them, her eyes wide. She looked familiar, although Harry had the feeling that he was used to seeing her in some other garb than Auror robes.

"Angelina Johnson," she said. "Don't you recognize your old Quidditch captain?"

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Harry stared at her, before Draco nudged him and he broke out of whatever daze he'd been in and he began smiling.

"Angelina," he said and stretched out his hand to shake hers. She would have none of it, though; she pulled him into a hug instead.

"How have you been, Harry?"

"Um—" Harry said, not knowing what he could say. He'd left the Wizarding world behind by choice – to say he'd been great and that he wished he could have stayed away; he had a feeling that wouldn't be all that popular. He looked at Draco, as though an answer would be printed on his forehead.

Angelina cocked her head to the side. "And Draco Malfoy, if my eyes don't deceive me," she said, a curious smile on her lips. "I didn't think you'd ever dare to go back in here again."

"Again?" Harry asked. "You've been here before?"

"How else would I know that the Aurors' headquarters is on the second floor," Draco muttered. "Of course I have. My father brought me here several times when I was a child."

"So," Angelina said after a moment, "I'm guessing that since the Wizarding world hasn't seen much of you two in the last few years, that something big has happened that you need help with, for you to go straight into the devil's lair?"

Harry hesitated. "We are here to see an Auror."

"Does it matter which one?" Angelina asked.

Harry shook his head.

"Well, then, let's go into my office," said Angelina. She led the way into one of the small offices and transfigured a shoelace into a chair for Harry. "Would you like a chair as well or are you comfortable?" she asked Draco.

"I'm fine," Draco said. "Let's get this over with."

Angelina nodded.

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Harry began talking. “Well, it all started when...”

Thirty minutes later, he finished. His throat felt slightly dry and Angelina seemed to recognize this, as she poured a glass of water for him. Draco, who had added in details Harry had forgotten during the story-telling, asked, “So, is there anything you can do for us?”

Angelina looked thoughtful. It wasn’t all that surprising that someone from the Wizarding world had found Harry and Draco and decided that they would look nicer dead. Both men had lots of enemies – the question was where to start looking for the culprit.

“I will speak to my partner and with the Head of the department,” she said finally. “I will go through the records to see if there has ever been a Mona D’Razi at Hogwarts and if there hasn’t been, I will contact the other schools. I seem to recall the name, but I could be mistaken. I am sure Headmaster Snape will help me if I tell you it’s for you, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco smirked. “I think you should fail to mention Harry’s name, though.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Headmaster Snape still, huh? Are the kids still scared to death of him?”

Angelina smiled. “They’ve gotten used to it. Besides, Deputy Headmistress Weasley does a good job keeping him in check.”

“Deputy Head*mistress* Weasley? As in Ginny?” Harry asked incredulously. When he’d left the Wizarding world, the spot still hadn’t been fitted yet.

“Yes,” Angelina nodded. “Charlie Weasley went in and acted as Deputy for a while, but after Ginny got her degree in Transfiguration, she took over the position so that Charlie could go back to his old job. She’s the Transfigurations teacher, too, just like old Professor McGonagall.”

“Who teaches Potions?” Draco asked.

“An Italian guy who seems more interested in girls and his own looks than in the subject,” Angelina said, suddenly scowling. She cocked her head to the side again, studying Draco. “Say, you were pretty good with Potions. You wouldn’t want to come back and do a career as a Professor, would you?”

Draco shook his head, an almost-smile on his lips. “No thanks.”

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Angelina shrugged. “Ah well, it was worth a try. Now, back to the topic at hand.”

“What will be the punishment for the person who cast the Heart Breaker curse, if he or she is found?” Harry asked.

“Dementor’s Kiss,” Angelina said. “The curse has been labelled as an Unforgivable since the war ended. You just weren’t here when the legislation was passed. The Heart Breaker curse and the Insanity curse were both labelled Unforgivables.”

The three fell silent, remembering the war and the new curses that the Dark side had introduced to the world in order to win the war. St Mungo’s mental ward had been filled to the brim after the Dark side started casting the Insanity curse. There was no counter spell.

“I’m glad you’ve decided to re-enter the magical world,” Angelina finally said.

“I’m— I’m sorry, Angelina,” said Harry. “We’re not returning to the Wizarding world. We need your help because the person or persons behind the attacks on us are using magic, but other than that, neither I nor Draco have any wish to re-enter this world.”

Angelina’s face fell slightly, but she smiled at them anyway. “I’m sad to hear that, Harry. But if you have found happiness in the Muggle world, I fully understand that you don’t want to come back.”

Harry smiled back at her and then stood up. “We’ve taken up enough of your time,” he said.

“Not at all; this has been a most interesting forty-five minutes,” Angelina said, standing up as well to shake Harry’s hand.

“I assume you will owl us if you find something?” Harry asked.

“Of course I will,” Angelina promised.

They left. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as the telephone booth took them up to the Muggle street again, hoping that no one had recognized him or Draco. They were quite outstanding – Draco with his impossibly pale skin and pale blond hair, Harry with his messy black mop of hair and startling green eyes. But no one had said anything; they had just seemed to be going along in their own thoughts, something which Harry was very happy for.

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“Harry?”

“Hm?”

They were strolling towards their home at a leisurely pace, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the fresh air. They had decided against taking a taxi, instead choosing to walk back.

“I think you need to have your wand.”

Harry stopped dead in his tracks, staring after Draco who continued to push himself forward.

“W-what?”

Draco stopped, turning around to look at Harry. “You need to get your wand again. You can’t protect yourself against these curses without it.”

“I can’t protect myself against it with a wand either,” Harry said. “Neither the Heart Breaker nor the Insanity curse have any counter spells – only spells to make the damage less severe.”

Draco looked down. “No, it was created with the sole purpose of just that – there wasn’t supposed to be any way to stop the curses, that was the idea.”

“But what if one of the curses hit a Death Eater?” Harry asked. “Then there would be no way to save him either.”

“If a Death Eater was stupid enough to get hit by a curse, then he didn’t deserve to be saved,” Draco said. “Don’t look at me like that; it was the Death Eaters’ and Voldemort’s way of looking at things, not me.”

Harry nodded, swallowing.

Draco continued talking as he started to push himself forward again in a show that they should continue on. “My father was one of the Death Eaters involved in creating the curse. As I was to be a Death Eater, I was taught the curse and its properties. As far as I know, there is still no counter curse to either of the two.”

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Harry walked up beside him, the sudden, unwelcome realization of just how deadly Draco could be hitting him with full force.

*“Scared, Potter?”*

*Malfoy’s sneering face was before him, his two goons lingering a few feet behind, ready to step in to ‘help’ if needed.*

“Harry?”

Harry shook his head, mumbling, “Sorry.”

“You disappear a million miles away sometimes,” Draco said.

Harry just shrugged.

“Where is your wand?”

“In a bank safe,” Harry said after a moment’s hesitation. “It’s been there since I left the Wizarding world. I— I didn’t want it, but I couldn’t just leave it behind and I couldn’t destroy it. It’s too much of my history in it.”

Draco nodded in understanding. “What bank?”

After telling Draco, Harry found himself unwillingly pulled towards the bank in question. The bank safes were in the basement and Harry took off the necklace he was wearing. A small key dangled from it.

“So that’s why you always wear that necklace,” Draco said.

Harry nodded mutely. His hand shook slightly as he placed the key in the keyhole and turned it around.

In the small space of the safe lay some of Harry’s once most prized possessions. His wand lay there, untouched and just as he remembered it. It lay on top of a cloak; the Invisibility Cloak that had once been Harry’s father’s. Harry’s reached out and carefully touched the material, letting it slip through his fingers.

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Further into the safe lay parchment and a worn quill. “I got it from Ron,” he explained quietly as he ran his finger gently over the quill. He knew he was being sentimental, but he couldn’t help it. There was a reason why he had locked these things away.

A copy of ‘Hogwarts, A History’ lay beneath the quill. It was new, unused.

“A gift from Granger?” Draco asked.

Harry nodded quietly. “She gave it to me for Christmas in sixth year. She thought I needed to read it.”

“But you never opened it,” Draco said.

“There was a bit too much going on for me to sit down and read,” Harry said.

The silence spread as Harry allowed memories he’d pressed back to return. Memories of happier days at Hogwarts, with Ron and Hermione, with the other Gryffindors, with Quidditch and classes that at the time seemed never ending. Harry closed his eyes, letting the memories flood him. Bad memories – Sirius’ death, the Hogsmeade weekend that went to Hell, Ron’s death, Snape’s injuries, Dumbledore’s death – so many deaths.

His breathing was erratic when he opened his eyes again to find Draco looking at him, concern apparent in his eyes.

“Let’s go home,” he suggested gently.

Harry nodded shakily. He took his wand and placed it carefully in his bag, before locking the safe and letting the keychain fall underneath his clothes again. They took the elevator up and the walk home was silent.

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As soon as Harry and Draco arrived home, Harry went into the pool room. Draco followed quietly as Harry turned the taps and the water started flowing into the pool and ever so slowly started filling it.

“It looks nice, doesn’t it?” Harry asked, looking around the room.

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The cool white and blue-grey marble with the black details made for a very calm room, with small spotlights in a regular pattern in the ceiling and dim lights on the walls.

“Needs some vegetation,” Draco said, raising an eyebrow at the bare room.

Harry rolled his eyes. “You can’t just say something nice about it, can you?”

An hour and a half later, the pool was filled. Harry and Draco went to the room again and Harry turned around. “Would you like to inaugurate it?”

Draco looked uncertainly at the water, then at Harry. “Okay,” he said, although Harry could hear the hesitance in the word.

Harry had let build a small shower stall and next to it, two changing rooms. After handing Draco a pair of swimming trunks, Harry went into one and Draco pushed himself into the other. A few minutes later, Harry was done and came outside. While he waited for Draco to get done, he felt the temperature of the water. It wasn’t hot, but it was far from cold. Harry didn’t like cold water.

Draco refused to meet Harry’s eyes when he came out of the changing room. He looked at his lap, seeming very self-conscious for once. Harry felt things stir within that shouldn’t stir at the sight of an almost-naked Draco. The finely chiselled chest, almost hairless, where the muscles were returning bit by bit as Draco put them to use and exercised. The pale skin, looking almost white, the slender arms and fine hands and the long legs that had very little muscle now but were still.

*“Beautiful, are they not?”*

Draco looked unusually self-aware, avoiding Harry’s eyes.

Harry walked over to him, bent down in front of him and captured his mouth in a kiss that conveyed exactly what he was thinking. “You are gorgeous.”

Draco looked at him dubiously but didn’t say anything.

Harry picked Draco up, supporting his back with one arm and the other one under his knees. He walked over to the pool side, where there was stairs going down into the water. He

## *The Depths of Winter*

carefully set his feet down, descending slowly into the pool. The water was warm and felt good against his skin. As he began dipping Draco in the water he asked, "Okay?"

Draco nodded mutely.

Once they were in the water, Harry had water that reached up to just to his elbows. The pool was deeper on the other end.

Harry let go of Draco's legs, changing his hands so that he held the pale shoulders instead, supporting him. Draco's legs fell to the bottom of the pool as he was unable to move them, unable to control them at all. It wasn't for the lack of trying, though; Harry could see the concentration on Draco's face as he tried to move his legs of his own power. The disappointment came soon after, as Draco realised that he couldn't do it. His shoulders slumped forward, just slightly, just enough for Harry who was watching closely, to see and feel the change.

"Don't push it," Harry said softly. "We'll train here as often as you need for you to get better."

Draco nodded; Harry could see his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.

"Lay back and enjoy the water for a little," Harry said.

He helped Draco switch so that he was lying on his back, floating on the water. Harry supported him lightly beneath his shoulders and underneath his knees, careful to keep water from washing over Draco's face. He could feel that Draco was still tense, but pretended not to notice. Sooner or later, he would learn to relax, or at least Harry hoped so.

He let his fingers run over Draco's body, keeping him afloat, massaging a bit as he went.

As the minutes passed, Draco relaxed somewhat, letting the water soothe him. Harry just stood next to him, hands keeping him afloat, watching so that Draco's head never went underwater. The skin on his hands began getting quite wrinkly after a while and he asked Draco if he wanted to get up.

Draco opened his eyes and looked at Harry, giving him a small nod. Harry took Draco gently by the shoulders and pulled him towards the stairs, where he made Draco sit, water up to his waist.

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“I’m just going to get towels for us,” he said and got out of the water. In the cabinet on the other side, he took out two fluffy blue towels. He put one on the bench for himself to use and unfolded the other one, draping it over the wheelchair so that Draco could be easily wrapped up.

Draco was, once again, avoiding Harry’s eyes and gazing down at his hands. Harry descended into the water and placed a hand on the man’s pale shoulder.

“Draco?”

“How can you even look at me?” The words came out as a harsh whisper and Draco looked up at him.

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked.

“This!” Draco said, frustrated, and threw his arm out to motion at his legs. “I’m— I’m so weak! I can’t even stand up by myself. I can’t do anything, I can’t walk, I can’t reach things, I can’t— I can’t even get up a flight of stairs by myself! How can you stand it? How can you stand looking at me at all? I was horrid to you for years and now you take care of me and I don’t understand how you can look at me without being completely disgusted because *I* am disgusted every time I see myself in the mirror and— and—”

Draco pressed his hand over his eye, trying to stop the tears from coming, but he wasn’t successful. Tears of despair made their way down his pale cheeks and he hid his face from Harry, who stood before him, his heart breaking at the sight of Draco.

Quietly, he gathered Draco to him. The other man resisted at first, but Harry didn’t let go and soon, Draco was clinging to him, his body shaking with sobs.

“I’m so tired,” he whispered between sobs. “I can’t take it, I don’t want it anymore. I— I can’t do it any longer. I don’t want it.”

Harry ran his hand through Draco’s wet hair, the other hand making slow circles on the pale back, trying to calm him.

“How can you look at me?” Draco’s voice was getting quieter, sounding so broken and lost. “How can you stand me at all?”

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Because you are beautiful,” Harry whispered, just as softly but his voice steady and filled with— love? Yes, he realised. He wasn’t freaked out by the idea, instead he just let it flow over him. He *loved* Draco. Loved him with every part of his being. That was why this was so hard, to see him break down like this.

“I’m not—“

“Shh,” Harry said. “You are. You are beautiful, strong and absolutely wonderful.”

Draco pulled away enough to look at Harry in the eyes. “But I—“

“No,” Harry whispered, placing a finger to Draco’s lips. “No buts. Just accept.”

He leaned down and kissed Draco, pressing their lips together in a way that he hoped Draco would take as loving, promising. He was suddenly very certain of what he wanted – he wanted to show Draco that he was truly beautiful; he wanted Draco to feel; he wanted Draco to understand that he wanted to be with him.

When their lips met the touch was feathery at first. Full red lips met soft pink and Harry tasted the salt of Draco’s tears. His hands went up to cup Draco’s cheeks and all of his mind was on trying to make Draco understand what he felt. Both men had closed their eyes; Draco was shaking under Harry’s touch but didn’t pull away. Harry leaned in into the kiss a bit further, applying just a little more pressure.

Draco inclined his head just a bit to the side, breathing in and then he kissed back, moving into Harry a little.

The uncertainty was like the first time they’d kissed. Harry didn’t know if physical affection was what Draco needed at the moment, so he took it slowly, ready for rejection. But Draco didn’t pull back; he welcomed Harry’s lips and hands, his own fingers treading through Harry’s wet hair. Harry’s tongue slipped out and licked Draco’s lower lip. Draco made a sound, a soft moan in the back of his throat. Harry took that as an okay to continue and the kiss became bolder as he started exploring Draco’s mouth for real. The kiss was more intense than any they’d shared before and he never wanted it to stop.

When they finally had to pull away, they were both breathless.

Draco’s eyes were still closed, the tear tracks still visible on his cheeks, his lips slightly redder than usual. He opened his eyes gradually, then blinked to focus his vision on Harry. His eyes

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were still red and puffy from crying, but Harry thought Draco was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

Neither man said anything, but their gazes were locked and Harry smiled. Draco returned it, smiling weakly back.

Harry moved and picked Draco up from the pool. Draco leaned into Harry's touch, hiding his face in Harry's shoulder. Making a split-second decision, Harry just leaned down and picked the towels up from the wheelchair with one hand and then carried Draco from the pool-room to Draco's bedroom. Placing him on the bed without a word, they just kept looking at each other.

"I don't know if I can—" Draco began uncertainly. "I've not— I haven't—"

"It doesn't matter," Harry said, making sure love laced every word. "I'll make it good for the both of us. Just guide me, tell me what feels good."

Draco nodded. Harry could see uncertainty playing in the grey eyes.

"We don't have to do this if you don't want to," Harry said. "We don't have to do anything at all, if you're not ready."

Draco closed his eyes briefly, then said, "I'm ready. I just— I want it to be good— I don't want to disappoint you."

Harry smiled gently, brushing a strand of blond hair away from Draco's face. "You won't. Just being here with you is greater than anything I could have imagined."

Then Draco tugged Harry closer, kissing him again and pulling him with him down on the bed. Draco's hands ran over Harry's body and Harry shivered at the contact, his need for Draco growing. The kisses were long and slow, fuelled by passion and love and gentleness. Neither had any need to go quick; they had all the time in the world to explore each other, to see what felt good to the other.

Harry moved to kiss Draco's jaw and down his throat and shoulders. His hands worked, moving swiftly over Draco's body and his brain registered every time Draco gasped. He soon discovered that the hollow of Draco's neck was a very sensitive spot; Draco's head was thrown back, with Draco arching into Harry's kisses. Harry's fingers played with Draco's nipples, twisting and pinching, careful not to do it too hard.

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“Yes, yes,” Draco mumbled, withering beneath Harry. “Do that again, do it harder—oh *God...*”

Harry smiled, the smile of a predator. He bent down and licked the darkened area around Draco’s nipples, while his hands continued downwards. He knew Draco wouldn’t be able to feel much; he knew what Draco had meant earlier was that he hadn’t had an erection since the accident. Harry had read about it in the books.

“Oh yes,” Draco hissed, arching again as Harry’s tongue circled his navel, dipping into it and adding pressure. His hands were back on Draco’s nipples again.

Harry could feel Draco’s cock move, though it far from the straining erection he himself had by now. Still, the movement reassured him – as if Draco’s moans and hissing hadn’t already – that he was doing things right. He continued stroking, squeezing and kissing Draco all over; the pale skin looked inviting as whipped cream and the vision of a whipped cream covered Draco almost sent him over the edge.

It may have taken minutes, it may have taken hours. For all that Harry cared, an eternity could have passed; he wouldn’t have noticed. He was in heaven and had no intention of leaving. The music in his ears that was Draco as he cried out would forever be etched into his mind.

Much, much later, Draco and Harry fell asleep, naked bodies tightly intertwined beneath the sheets.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter twenty-two*

### *Gone*

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The sun was shining in through the window when Harry woke up, slightly disoriented since the light wasn't coming from the same side as he was used to from his own room. Then he felt Draco move in his arms and the memories of the day before came back. He smiled. Draco still lay curled into him, his head resting on Harry's arm. The pale eyelashes cast shadows on his cheeks and his blond hair was in a disarray. Harry couldn't stop looking at him; it was as though he was seeing him for the very first time. He truly was beautiful, this man.

He smiled as he remembered the night before; the touching, kissing, the gasps and pleading. Draco obviously hadn't known he was still able to feel the way he'd felt. Harry didn't mind showing him. In fact, Harry didn't mind a single thing as long as it involved Draco. When he'd realised he loved Draco the day before, he had also realised that it didn't matter what happened to them; Harry would stay by Draco forever, if that was necessary.

He hadn't said anything to Draco yet. After all, even though Harry might love Draco, he had no idea if Draco felt the same way.

He didn't know how much time had passed when Draco's lashes finally fluttered open and hazy grey eyes looked into startling green.

"Good morning," Harry said softly, smiling at him.

Draco smiled back, almost shyly. "Mornin'," he said.

"Sleep well?"

Draco nodded, his eyes falling shut again. "Wonderfully."

Harry bent down and kissed him lightly. Draco's arm circled Harry's waist and pulled him closer yet, before going up and tangling in his messy hair. A moan escaped Draco's lips as Harry trailed kisses down his neck and shoulder, sucking and licking here and there.

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When they pulled away, Harry asked carefully, “Are you okay?” They hadn’t spoken of Draco’s breakdown any more the night before.

Draco looked down, then up at Harry again. “I will be.”

“Just don’t doubt yourself. You are beautiful,” Harry said softly, running his fingers through Draco’s hair. “You’re also strong, witty, sarcastic, passionate— incredible.”

Draco looked down and then looked at Harry again, his voice hoarse as he said, “What, nothing more than that?”

“Oh, so much more than that but we don’t have all day and we don’t want to inflate your ego too much, now do we?” Harry asked. He cupped Draco’s cheek and kissed him gently. “Don’t think you’re not worth anything, because you are worth everything and more.”

Draco nodded, the movement small.

“Okay?” Harry asked.

Another small nod and Draco said, “Okay.”

“Good, then can we do some more snogging? Because that was seriously the best snogging I’ve done in – well, forever probably but I shouldn’t say that out loud because your ego will get too big for your—“

Draco shut him up with another kiss. Harry didn’t mind.

\*

They managed to drag themselves out of bed a good while later, when both their stomachs were screaming for breakfast. Once Harry had gotten the wheelchair from the poolroom, Draco began making breakfast. Eggs and bacon, mixed with kissing and lots of accidental touching made the meal a very long one indeed.

Draco had sat down on the couch to read while Harry wrote, when Harry said to him, “You should get a job.”

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Draco looked up at him, one eyebrow raised. “A job?”

“So that you have something to do during the days,” Harry said. He wasn’t completely sure of whether this was the right way to go about it, but he had to try.

“What makes you think I don’t have a job already?”

That was not what Harry had expected. “You have a job?”

“Where to do you think I disappear all day long?” Draco asked, smirking at him, obviously enjoying surprising Harry.

Harry did remember Draco’s disappearances all too well – the first time he’d been gone was the time when Harry had called Myra, completely frantic.

“But— where?”

“A youth centre,” Draco said, still smirking. “A place for teens to play pool, meet friends, paint and get all their energy out, instead of them going around town destroying things.”

Harry’s mouth was hanging open and he abruptly shut it. He tried to come up with something suitable to say, but his mind remained blank.

“What, no questions?” Draco asked, his delicate eyebrow rising again.

“What do you do there?” Harry finally managed to ask.

“I keep track of the kids and see to it that they don’t cause trouble,” Draco replied easily. His eyes flashed suddenly. “And yes, I can manage that even from a wheelchair.”

Harry cocked his head to the side and thought that he didn’t have any problem believing that. Draco’s scowl was enough to frighten anyone who was younger – and several that were older, too. It was almost as bad as Snape’s had been.

“Well— shouldn’t you be there now, then?” Harry asked.

Draco shook his head. “I only work three days a week. Today is my day off and yesterday I called them and said I couldn’t come in,” he said. Suddenly he sounded hesitant. “I— I don’t

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get paid, so they can't do anything if I call them and say I'm not coming in. They need the help."

"Why don't you get paid?"

"Because it's all volunteer work," Draco said. "The centre wouldn't survive otherwise."

Harry nodded slowly in understanding. "Is it fun?"

The self-assured Draco returned and he smirked. "It is. It is like being leader of the Slytherins again."

Harry walked the few strides over to where Draco was sitting and placed a kiss on Draco's lips. Draco soon wrapped his arms around Harry. When they pulled away, both panting, Harry said, "I just had to kiss that smirk off your face."

\*

Darius called that afternoon and announced that he was coming over for dinner.

"I just love how your friends invite themselves over," Draco muttered, although his tone was light so Harry knew he didn't mind. Instead he made a delicious dinner – rice with chicken, a cheese sauce and vegetables of various kinds.

Harry called Myra and asked if she wanted to come over as well.

"Oh, Harry, I'd love to," Myra said, "but I can't."

"What are you doing? Studying?" Harry asked.

"No, for once I'm not," Myra said happily. "I'm going out on a *date*."

Harry goggled. "A date? With who?"

"Oh don't sound so surprised, Harry, it's not like it's the first time I've ever gone on a date," Myra said, sounding a bit put out.

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It may not be the first date she'd go on, but it was the first time she'd gone out on a date since Harry had found out Darius' crush on her, which made it suddenly obvious just why Darius was coming over.

"He studies Anthropology and we met in the Union Bar," Myra said, sounding excited. "He's a year older than me and is from France!"

Harry didn't know what was so special with that, but he was quite certain that Darius would be one unhappy camper tonight.

"So how is it going with you and Draco?" Myra asked. It sounded as though she was still smiling widely.

"Um, good," Harry mumbled, feeling his cheeks heat up.

"Good?" Myra asked. "Harry, dear, please be a little more eloquent than that, will you?"

"It's going really good," Harry said, smirking because he was able to annoy Myra.

"All right, all right, don't tell me then," Myra said, sounding quite put out. "I'm just happy it's all working out for you. Take care of him. If you hurt him—"

"You do know that you were my friend first, don't you?" Harry asked, exasperated.

"Yes, yes," Myra said and Harry was certain she was rolling her eyes. "Oh, look at the time. Harry, I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow, though – I want to use that rain check on the dinner."

They hung up and Harry returned, a small smile playing on his lips, to the kitchen where Draco was working. Harry never stopped being amazed with how efficient Draco could be, despite the wheelchair. His movements were still graceful, even when confined and hindered.

"Are you going to stand there and stare or will you stir the sauce?" Draco asked irritably.

Harry hurried to him and started stirring.

"Did Myra say yes?"

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“No,” Harry said and suddenly smiled. “Although I do believe I know why Darius is coming over.”

Draco raised an eyebrow at him. “Really? And what might that reason be?”

“Myra has a date,” Harry said, “and Darius is—“

“—in love with her,” Draco said.

Harry chuckled. “Yes,” he said. “I don’t think he’ll be in too good a mood tonight.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Love. Makes you behave stupidly.”

Harry kissed him.

“What was that for?”

“Just to show how stupidly love makes us act,” Harry said, grinning at him, before he continued to stir the sauce.

The doorbell rang a half hour later and Darius stood outside, his shoulders slumped and barely raising his eyes enough to look at Harry.

“Hello cheerful,” Harry said, letting him in.

Darius just looked at him morosely and hung his coat off. “Food?” he asked.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Draco is finishing up in the kitchen, it’ll be done in a minute.”

Darius nodded but didn’t say anything. He walked in and made a small gesture with his head by way of greeting Draco.

“You look like someone has just died,” Draco said.

Darius shrugged.

“You know, this is what you’re going to get until you tell her that you’re in love with her,” Draco continued.

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Darius looked at Harry. “You *told* him?”

“No,” said Harry. “He’s a smart boy. Figured it out all by himself.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Yes, right,” Draco said. “Now why don’t you just tell the lady?”

Darius slumped down on the couch. “What would she want with me? She’s worth someone better.”

“Oh *please* don’t start with that crap,” Draco said. “You’re good enough to be her friend, why wouldn’t you be good enough to be her lover?”

“Because ‘friend’ and ‘lover’ are two entirely different things!” Darius exclaimed. “What would you know about it anyway? You don’t have—”

Harry had stood up and placed his hand on Draco’s shoulder. “They’re not that different,” he said quietly. “And one can grow out of the other.”

“What? That’s not—” Then Darius stopped and cocked his head to the side, understanding dawning. “You two?”

Harry nodded. “Yes. Us two.”

Darius paused and considered what he’d just been told. “Oh,” he said finally. “Well, I guess I won’t have to worry about you wanting to date Myra.”

Harry smiled at him. “Definitely not. She’s a great friend, but she’s too much of a sister to me.” He made a face. “Ew, kissing her.”

“Hey!” Darius looked indignant.

Harry grinned at him. “Just needed to lighten the overall feeling here. Now will you *tell her*, please? So that we can finally have some peace in this group?”

Darius nodded. “I’ll tell her. I will.”

“Good. Now let’s eat.”

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They sat down and ate the delicious dinner Draco had put together. The mood was a lot lighter now that the three men had talked.

“You do realise,” said Darius, “that we just defied the typical maleness in the world? You know, the part where we never ever talk about feelings.”

“No one will ever know,” Draco said.

“Least of all Myra,” Harry said.

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want her thinking we’re ill, or something.”

Suddenly, there was a knocking sound at the window. At first, Harry thought he’d imagined it, but then it happened again. Draco looked up at him, an eyebrow raised. Harry wiped his mouth and stood up, walking over to the large glass window. Darius and Draco followed him interestedly.

“An owl?” Darius asked, clearly surprised, when Harry opened the window and a ruffled brown owl swooped in, a piece of parchment tied to its leg.

“It’s from one of my— friends,” Harry said as he began untying the note from the bird’s leg. “He, uh, likes birds.”

“Oh, cool. What does the note say?” Darius asked curiously.

Harry unrolled the parchment and scanned through the text written. The colour drained from his cheeks as he read and the parchment fell from his hands. Draco quickly wheeled himself over and picked the note up from the floor. He read the writing as well and looked up at Harry when he was done, looking a bit too pale himself.

“So she did go to Hogwarts,” Draco said softly.

Harry nodded, his face still white.

“Hogwarts?” Darius asked dumbly. “What’s a Hogwarts?”

“It’s my old school,” Harry said, his voice barely more than a whisper. “Our old school.”

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Darius didn't look as though he understood any more of what was going on. "And who is 'she'?"

Harry suddenly seemed to snap out of his daze. "No one," he said. "Nothing. Let's eat. I'll take care of this later."

Draco shot him a worried look, but didn't say anything. He wheeled himself back to his place after folding up the note and putting it in his pocket. Darius still looked wholly confused, but didn't ask anything more. The atmosphere was quiet, uneasy, and the conversation never became what it had before the owl had arrived. When they'd finished eating, the three men did the dishes and then Darius said he needed to get home. They said their good byes and he left, leaving Draco to deal with a still dazed Harry.

"Are you all right?" he asked as soon as the door had closed.

Harry looked down at him and said quietly, "Desdemona D'Razi was thrown out of Hogwarts in her third year, which was four years ago, for violent behaviour."

"Yes?"

"We were at Hogwarts with her, Draco. Why don't I remember her? Why is she here? Why would she want to blow my apartment up? Why was she cursed with that horrible curse? Where is she now? *What is going on?*"

Draco reached out and squeezed his hand. "I don't know, Harry. But I promise we'll get to the bottom of it all. *Tomorrow*. For now, let's go to bed now."

Harry shook his head. "No, I want to write for a little."

Draco looked a bit taken aback, his expression falling ever so slightly. "Oh."

Harry paused and looked at him, his heart expanding in his chest by just watching him. His cheeks heating up, he asked, "Will you sleep in my room tonight?"

Draco smiled slightly. "Of course. Let me just go take a shower first."

Harry nodded and they went into their respective bedrooms. Harry turned on his laptop and opened his story. It was over two hundred pages long by now and almost finished, which was why Harry wanted to write on it now. He wanted it finished so that he wouldn't have the

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publishers hanging over his head anymore – plus he wanted to be done with the story so that he could show it to Draco.

There was a sudden crash.

Harry was up from his seat just half a second later, running towards Draco's bathroom. His heart was racing, the blood pumping in his ears, making the short way over to the bathroom seem impossibly long. He pulled open the door to Draco's room and then the one to the bathroom and he was glad that Draco had had the sense to leave it unlocked.

Draco was on the floor, rubbing his head.

"Draco?" Harry asked, his throat constricting, making the word come out only as a squeak.

Draco looked up, all the while continuing to rub the back of his head, wincing. "Hey," he said.

"What are you doing?" Harry fell to his knees next to Draco, pretending not to notice Draco's state of undress.

"Well, it would seem as though I fell," Draco drawled, starting to push himself upwards.

"But—"

"Harry, I'm fine. I just lost my balance and the floor was slippery, so I fell. Nothing more."

Harry nodded, still wide-eyed. "Okay. Nothing more. Right."

Draco pulled himself up onto the toilet. He grabbed Harry by the arm and pulled him down towards him, letting their lips meet in a sweet, reassuring kiss.

"I'm really okay," he said gently when he pulled away. "Don't worry."

Harry gave him a shaky smile and nodded, though his heart wasn't quite convinced; it continued to beat rapidly in his chest. "No worry. Yeah. Right. No worry."

"I'll be out in a few minutes," Draco said, releasing him. "Go work on that masterpiece of yours."

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Harry nodded and left the bathroom, his heart still beating wildly in his chest. He sat down in his room by the computer, where the marker still blinked impatiently, waiting for his next word. His legs felt like jelly and he rested his head in his arms. His nerves couldn't take any more of this.

He was lost in thought and when Draco entered, Harry didn't hear him. He startled when Draco put his hands gently on his shoulders and began massaging.

"Come on," he said. "Lay down with me."

Harry nodded and stood up, following Draco as he crawled under the sheets. As soon as he laid down, Draco's arms came around him and Harry felt all of his upper body press against his back. He relaxed slowly, letting Draco's presence reassure him.

\*

"I'll see you tonight," Draco said.

Harry sat up in bed, his hair even more dishevelled than usual. "Where are you going?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "To work," he said.

"Oh," said Harry dumbly. It felt strange that Draco had a job to go to and he didn't.

"Get done with that book of yours today," Draco said. "That way, we can have a bit of a—celebration tonight. What do you say?"

Harry grinned. "For some reason, my motivation for finishing the book just went way up."

"Good." Draco wheeled himself into the room and pulled Harry to him. Their lips crushed together in a kiss that was loving and demanding, playful and warring. Draco's tongue trailed Harry's and begged entrance, which Harry readily gave him, opening up for exploration. He moaned into the kiss, his arms going around Draco and messing up his hair. Draco in turn let his hands travel down Harry's face, neck, to explore his chest.

"Mm," Harry mumbled between kisses. "You'll never get— to work— if you continue— like this."

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Draco smirked. “I’m sure they can— handle it a few minutes— by themselves.”

Harry felt himself grow aroused. The intensity of the kisses increased and buttons were undone. Harry’s pyjama shirt was discarded and soon Draco’s followed suit. As Draco started touching him for real, he lost sense of reality and he submitted himself completely to Draco’s ministrations.

\*

After Draco had finally managed to leave the house – an hour too late – Harry sat down with the note Angelina had sent him. The information had been short and impersonal; only the information about Mona.

As the bird flew off with the letter, Harry sat down by the computer, his mind still whirling with questions. Nothing made sense. *Why?* Why would Mona want to blow them up? Or rather, if it really was Mona who was behind the bombing, then why did she want to murder *Draco*? Because she’d made sure that Harry wasn’t in the apartment at the time; he’d taken her out on a date.

And who had Mona been talking about when she’d said, “I’ll be found.” Why had Mona been cursed? Who’d been hiding in the bushes? By whom would she be found?

He sat down by his computer and closed off all the thoughts of Mona and the Ministry and everything else by concentrating on his story. He didn’t have much left now and his fingers moved rapidly over the keys as he tied together all the strings of the story he’d created.

Just as he was writing the epilogue, the phone rang. He jumped, unprepared for the sound.

“Hello?”

“Hi, this is Joanne from the Green Teen Centre,” said an unfamiliar voice on the other end. “Do you have Draco there?”

“No, he left, about an hour ago,” Harry said. “He was, um, a bit late this morning. But he left – he should have arrived by now.”

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A sense of worry and dread suddenly settled in the pit of his stomach.

“He hasn’t come yet,” said Joanne. “We were getting a bit worried that something had happened.”

“I— I don’t know,” Harry said, standing up and starting to pace.

“Well, I guess he got hungry on the way and decided to get some breakfast or something,” Joanne said and it sounded like she was trying to smile. Harry couldn’t understand why.

“Yes— yes, that’s probably it,” Harry said weakly.

“Will you give me a call if you hear something from him?”

Harry nodded, then remembered that she couldn’t see him. “Yes, of course. And you, call me when he arrives.”

Not *if* he arrives; *when* he arrives.

“Of course, Mr. Evans,” Joanne said.

They hung up and Harry let the phone drop to the floor. He didn’t know it by fact yet, but in his heart he knew.

Draco was gone.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter twenty-three*

### *Finding Draco*

~ ~ ~

“What is it, Harry?” Myra looked worriedly up at him, her hand on his arm, trying to make him stand still. “Harry?”

“He’s gone,” Harry said and pulled himself out of her grip so that he could start pacing again.

They stood outside of the classroom Myra and Darius had just been having class in. Harry had sent Darius a text message on his cell phone and told them to leave the class; they’d done as asked and now they were here.

“Who’s gone?” Darius asked dumbly.

“Draco!” exclaimed Harry. He was upset, his heart beating madly in his chest.

“What do you mean by ‘gone?’” Myra asked.

“They called from the youth centre where he’s been working,” Harry explained, his voice stressed. “He never made it there. He left this morning and an hour later, one of the girls there called and said he hadn’t arrived yet. He still hasn’t. He’s gone.”

“And he doesn’t have a cell phone, does he?” Darius asked.

Harry shook his head, wishing he’d given Draco one. He also wished that he’d never let Draco leave at all that morning. He closed his eyes tightly shut and tried to stop wishing for things; they would never be real anyway.

“I need to find him,” Harry said.

“Have you talked to the police?” Myra asked.

“No, not yet,” Harry said. He didn’t know what good the Muggle police would do – what he really needed was to get in touch with the Aurors. However, he’d sent the owl off earlier,

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before Joanne had called, so the only way to get a hold of them was to actually go to the Ministry.

He wasn't quite sure why he'd decided to take Myra and Darius with him. He'd tried to get a hold of Hermione, but she wasn't answering on her home phone and he had no other way of contacting her, so in her stead, he'd decided to get his two best friends, even though they knew nothing of the Wizarding world. He would wonder later about the wisdom behind the decision.

"Then I'll call them and talk to them," Myra said. "Harry, you should just go home and sit tight. The police will handle it."

"No," Harry said. Myra and Darius both looked startled by the sheer force in his voice. "No, I'm not going home. I *have* to find him."

"Yes, Harry, I understand that, but what can you do?" Myra asked, trying to reason with him.

Harry swallowed. "There are people I can talk to," he said.

Myra frowned. "This is about your past, isn't it?" she asked. Darius followed the conversation with great interest.

"Yes," Harry said, his voice now far from strong. It sounded, even to himself, like a small, lost boy's voice. It wasn't far from the truth.

Myra's hand came up to rest on Harry's arm again, gently reassuring, but Harry found that he didn't want anyone's reassurance but Draco's. He pulled away. "Will you come with me?"

"Of course," Myra said, trying not to sound hurt by Harry's rejection.

Twenty minutes later, Myra and Darius were both hurrying after Harry, breathing heavily. Neither of them had asked where they were going, something for which Harry was thankful. Harry opened the door to the telephone booth, however, and they looked at him like he was crazy.

"Just trust me, all right?" Harry said.

"Harry – it's a *telephone booth*," said Myra, sounding as though she was worried for his sanity.

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“Yes, thank you for being so observant,” Harry said, harsher than he intended. “Sorry. Just—don’t ask. Not now. When we’ve found Draco, you can ask all the questions you want, okay? For now, just trust me. Please?”

Darius nodded and stepped inside the telephone booth. Myra gave him a long look before going in after Darius. Harry picked up the phone, dialled and spoke. Three buttons with their names and ‘visitor’ written on them popped out and Harry told his two friends to fasten them on their clothes. Then they began sinking into the ground and Myra yelped, hanging onto Harry. Darius looked quite uncertain himself, while Harry was just stressed.

He ran through the corridors, barely giving his two followers time to register their surroundings. Myra’s mouth was hanging open at the clothes worn and Darius stared wide-eyed as a Wizard came walking with a pyramid of books floating in the air behind him.

Harry took them to the elevator and within moments, they were on the Aurors’ floor. He ran down the corridor to Angelina’s office.

“Harry! What are you—“

Harry slammed the door shut as soon as Myra and Darius had come inside.

“He’s gone,” he said. “Draco is gone.”

A deep frown settled between Angelina’s brows. “That’s not good,” she said. She motioned for them to sit down. Myra inched closer to Harry and Darius looked quite uncertain, too. Angelina held out her hand. “I’m Auror Angelina Johnson,” she said.

“Au-what?” asked Darius.

Angelina frowned at Harry. “Are these two Muggles?”

“They’re my best friends and they’re going to help me find Draco,” said Harry, not quite answering her question.

“So they’re Muggles. Harry, you can’t just bring Muggles into the Ministry of Magic!”

“The Ministry of what?” Myra asked, sounding almost afraid.

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“The Ministry of *Magic*,” Angelina repeated. “You know, wizards and witches. I’m a witch. And Harry here, he’s a—“

“*Was* a wizard,” Harry corrected her. “I’m not anymore.”

“Harry, you can never not be a wizard. You have the knowledge and the power,” Angelina said. “No one, not even yourself, can take that away from you.”

“Thank you for this crash course in psychology,” Harry said angrily. “We’re here to find Draco, not to do introductions and play nice. He’s in *danger* and we need to find him.”

“And how do you suggest we do that?” asked Angelina.

“A location spell, of course,” Harry said. “I don’t remember any, but I’m quite sure that you do.”

Angelina glared at him for a moment, then nodded. “All right, let’s go to one of the private rooms. They have maps and such as well.”

Five minutes later, they were all seated in a room with no windows. Books covered all sides of the room and most of the floor. Angelina had set up the maps around her and was preparing for the spell.

“Oh, before we start,” she said and pointed her wand at Myra, whose eyes widened. “*Calma*.” Myra immediately seemed calmer and more relaxed.

“What did you—“ Darius began, moving towards Myra, but Angelina pointed her wand at him as well and he fell silent.

Harry didn’t say anything, just motioned for her to hurry up and do the location spell. Angelina nodded. She waved her wand and said a string of Latin that Harry didn’t recognize and a small ball of light appeared in front of her. It started moving towards the maps on Angelina’s right, but then it died.

“Strange,” Angelina said. “Let me try again.”

But the light did the same thing the second and third time she tried the spell; it died almost as soon as it started moving.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“What does that mean?” Harry asked, afraid for the answer.

“It means one of two things,” Angelina said, her frown deepening again. “Either he’s in a very well-warded place or he’s—” She trailed off, but everyone in the room knew the sentence’s continuation.

“He’s not,” Harry said, trying to feel as sure as he sounded.

“We need a stronger spell,” Angelina said after a moment of silence. “Something of his. Blood or hair is the best.”

“I don’t have either,” Harry said. “There’s probably hair on his hairbrush back at home, though.”

“I’ll send someone over there to get it,” Angelina said, standing up and leaving the room.

Harry sighed and sank down in one of the chairs, burying his hands in his hair. “I can’t do this,” he said. “I’m not the intelligent one. I’m the rash one, the Gryffindor.”

“The what?” Darius asked.

“Gryffindor,” Harry repeated. “I went to a boarding school in Scotland called Hogwarts and it has four houses and Gryffindor is one of them. You get sorted into a house by the Sorting Hat at the beginning of your first year.”

It made him feel slightly better to explain to his friends about such trivial things as houses at Hogwarts. They were easy, uncomplicated, and required no attachment or thought.

“I think you’re going to have to give us a very long explanation of things when this is over,” Darius said.

“Harry,” said Myra, frowning slightly, “you do have Draco’s blood.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked, all of his attention on Myra.

“The blood exchange,” said Myra. “Back when you were in the hospital. Draco and you exchanged blood to save your life. He— did magic.” Realization dawned on her and she fell silent.

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Angelina chose that moment to enter the room.

“He did a blood exchange with you?” Angelina asked incredulously.

Harry nodded. “He saved my life.”

“Things really have changed, haven’t they?” Angelina said.

Harry gave a small shrug, then remembered the seriousness of the situation again. “What do I need to do?”

“It’s not a hard spell to do,” Angelina said. “Especially not if you’ve done a blood exchange. The spell will be that much stronger if the blood is connected to you.”

He thought it was all taking too long. Angelina prepared him for the magic he was about to perform. She asked him how long ago it was since he’d last performed any spell at all and explained that it might drain him and make him tired. He snapped at her to get on with it.

The spell wasn’t hard; he chanted a short string of Ancient Greek and a red light appeared before him. It started bobbing down towards the maps. It floated back and forth for a few seconds before it sank down and burned a hole in the map.

“Bloody hell,” Harry swore, putting out the small fire.

Angelina looked thoughtful. “That’s strange,” she said. “That is a Muggle area, not a Wizarding one.”

Harry looked up at her. “Whatever. I’m going. Gather a few Aurors or something and come after me.”

“Harry, wait!”

Just as Harry said the Apparating spell, Myra pulled Darius with her and touched Harry. They all disappeared.

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## *The Depths of Winter*

When they opened their eyes again, they were outside of a huge apartment building. The early afternoon sun was bright and seemed too cheerful.

“Myra!” Harry yelled at her. “You know what you just did? You could have made me splinch us all! Don’t *ever* touch a wizard who’s about to say a spell.”

“Well I’m sorry,” Myra snapped back, “I’m not that used to being around wizards, so I don’t know the correct way to act!”

Harry looked as though he’d been slapped.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I shouldn’t have brought you at all. This is not for you. It’s not your place.”

“What are you talking about?” Myra said, raising her voice at her. “We’re your *friends*! This is the only place we can be, no matter how strange the place happens to be! So shut up and find Draco and we’ll just follow. And help.”

“I—” Harry wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—“

“Stop being sorry, Harry,” Myra said, cupping his face with her hand. “You’re upset. Let’s *go find Draco*.”

Harry nodded resolutely. Darius gave him a smile and he felt stronger again. He was there to find Draco and he had two amazing friends with him.

Quickly, he performed the location spell again and the red light appeared before him. It urged them down the street towards another building and in through the door. Harry quickly pulled it open and the three followed.

The building looked old – what little of it Harry saw, at least. He had eyes only for the red light before him and he followed it blindly as it moved up the stairs, higher and higher. He felt his heart beating madly and the blood pump in his ears, his breath short and laboured, but he was high on adrenaline. He *had* to find Draco.

They reached the top of the stairs and were met with—

“Nothing?” Darius said. “That light thing is weird.”

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“There has to be something,” Harry said. “The spell can’t lead us wrong.”

The light suddenly disappeared into the wall.

“Hey!” Darius exclaimed. “It’s gone.”

Harry frowned and started running his hands over the uneven wall. “It’s not gone,” he said. “It’s just continued—”

“So what do we do to open this thing, then?” Darius asked. “Sesame open up’, or what?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Hermione was the one who used to be good at these things.”

Suddenly, the wall started moving.

“What the—” Darius mumbled. “Perhaps it was ‘Sesame’.”

Harry frowned. Something was not quite right about this. Too many clues were pointing in one direction and he didn’t like that direction in the least.

The light was hovering a few feet away. The wall had moved to reveal a tunnel with stone walls. It was completely dark except for the red light and Harry muttered, “*Lumos*.”

“Whoa,” said Myra and stared at the light he’d just made.

The red light made them continue down the corridor. Harry’s heart was speeding; he felt sick. The tunnel was long, the air dry. Harry couldn’t understand how this could fit into the apartment building – but then, it was magic, so—

“Did you hear that?”

Myra’s words made Harry stop. Indeed, in the dark corridor, a low growl could be heard.

“What is that?”

“It doesn’t sound very pleasant,” Darius said, sounding just as worried as Myra.

The trio continued down, slower than before. Harry didn’t know if it was his imagination or if their footsteps actually echoed much louder now than they had before. The growling became

## *The Depths of Winter*

louder and was accompanied with scratching sounds. The red light didn't seem to notice the three's hesitance; it continued on just as before, hovering a few feet off the ground.

"Harry, I hope you're good with that stick, because whatever that is, it doesn't sound like fun," Darius whispered to him.

"It's a wand," Harry snapped back, his nerves making him unpleasant to be around, "not a stick."

Darius didn't seem reassured by his words.

The red light turned a corner and the trio followed suit.

"Bloody hell."

Darius had spoken and it got the three-headed dog's attention immediately. Harry almost breathed a sigh of relief.

"Fluffy," he said.

"Fluffy?" asked Myra incredulously.

Harry nodded. "Give me your watch."

Myra looked as though she was going to ask why, but thought the better of it. Harry waved his wand over it and turned it into a flute.

"Play," he said to Myra and gave it to her.

"What?"

"Play," Harry repeated. "He will fall asleep as soon as he hears music."

"But I haven't played since I was—"

Harry growled at her. "Just play, all right?"

Myra's eyes widened and she put the flute to her mouth and began playing. Darius was hiding behind Harry, watching the beast fearfully.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Now,” Harry said to Myra, “don’t stop playing until we’re way past him, okay?”

Myra nodded and continued to play random notes that didn’t sound all that good. Fluffy – or perhaps it was Fluffy’s cousin; Harry couldn’t tell – seemed to think it was all right however, because he lay down and was snoring within moments. Harry and his two friends walked up and past him. They had to climb over his back paws to get to the other side of the corridor; the corridor was narrow.

Ahead of them, the red light was still hovering. They hurried after it, with Myra still playing the flute.

“Can we not have any more of those interventions?” Darius asked, sounding shook up. His pale face clearly showed his distress.

“Hopefully we won’t,” Harry said as he broke into a run. They were wasting too much time!

Myra threw the flute when they couldn’t hear the beast’s snores anymore.

Suddenly they were in front of a door. The red light hovered before it and then it disappeared, as though someone had blown it out. They heard the sound of someone opening a door and light poured out of the room before them, blinding them. A dark silhouette stood in the doorway and a low voice said,

“Hello, Harry. I had a feeling you’d come visit me.”

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter twenty-four*

### *Revelations*

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Harry gaped, the blood pounding in his ears. “What the—”

“Surprised to see me?” Hermione asked.

Harry tried hard to come up with a complete sentence, but all that came out was, “But— you— no—”

“Yes, Harry, me,” Hermione said and Harry didn’t recognize her voice. It was too low, too threatening, too mad. It wasn’t the Hermione he’d known.

“No!” he screamed and lunged at her.

Her wand was drawn and she just flicked it, sending Harry crashing into the wall inside the room. Steel bands immediately wrapped themselves around his wrists and ankles.

“And you brought your friends,” Hermione said, chuckling. “Muggles! How nice of you.”

“Don’t touch them,” Harry screamed at her. “Don’t you hurt them or I’ll—”

“Or you’ll what?” Hermione asked. “You are no match for me. You never were, not back at Hogwarts and especially not now, when you haven’t done magic in years.”

She flicked her wand again and Myra and Darius came soaring into the room and they were both slammed into the wall, just as Harry had been. Darius hit his head hard on the rocks and fell unconscious to the floor.

“Darius!” Myra cried.

“Oh do shut up, you drama queen,” Hermione said, placing a full body bind on her. She fell next to Darius, her eyes still wide open and afraid.

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“Where is Draco?” Harry asked. When Hermione didn’t reply immediately, he screamed, “Answer me!”

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” said Hermione, “you really aren’t in a place to demand things.”

“Where is he?”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed at him. “Why would you want to see him? He’s a murderer.”

Harry’s blood froze to ice and his heart stopped. “What are you talking about?” he asked, although he suddenly had an idea of just what this was all about.

“He murdered Ron!” Hermione said and flicked her wrist again.

A large structure began moving and Harry’s eyes widened at the sight of Draco, strapped by his wrists and ankles and clad in a black robe, to a large wooden circle. He was clearly unconscious, his head bobbing from side to side as the structure moved. There were cuts and bruises covering every inch of visible skin. Harry struggled against the metal holding him prisoner.

“He didn’t murder Ron,” Harry said, knowing that he had to at least try to talk sense into her. “Death Eaters murdered Ron, not Draco.”

“Malfoy killed him!” Hermione said, not listening to Harry. “He lured him outside and killed him. He’s a cold blooded murderer!”

“He was cleared of all charges,” Harry said. “Dumbledore said he wasn’t guilty.”

“Dumbledore was a fool,” Hermione said and her voice held a hatred that Harry had never heard before. It scared him, made his blood run cold.

“Dumbledore was the greatest wizard of his time,” Harry withheld. “Draco was framed; his father and Voldemort wanted him to prove his allegiances and when Draco refused to kill Ron, *they* killed Ron instead, with Draco’s wand!”

“No,” Hermione screamed back at him. “You’re wrong! And today I’ll show you. He’s brainwashed you, don’t you see? It is what he does – he did it to Ron, to make Ron follow him outside, so that he could kill him. He’s a murderer! I’ll show you. *Accio knife.*”

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Harry's heart stopped again. "What are you doing, Hermione?"

"I told you," she said, "I'm going to show you that he's guilty. That he did murder Ron, my love."

"Hermione—"

"Don't 'Hermione' me," she snapped at him, advancing at him with his knife. "You should be thankful for this. You will be thankful for this, because by the end of this day, he will be dead and you'll be Harry again, the Harry who's not brainwashed."

She was standing a bit close for comfort with the knife, but Harry would rather have her here than anywhere near Draco. He just had to keep her talking, until he could figure out a way to get out of there.

"You'll be happy with me," Hermione whispered. "It will be us three again."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to bring him back, Harry," Hermione said. "Ron. With his murderer's blood, I will bring him back to life. Then we can be together again."

"You're insane!"

Hermione whipped around and the knife slashed through the skin of his cheek before he had time to react. The pain came a second later and he felt blood start welling out of the new wound. He held back a scream.

"Don't say that," she hissed at him.

She turned around and walked over to Draco. "*Enervate.*" She glanced over at Harry. "This process is painful. We wouldn't want him asleep for it."

Draco barely stirred, his eyes opening to look hazily around himself. He didn't raise it enough to see Harry; he slumped back, his chin resting on his chest.

"Draco," he whispered, but Draco didn't react to his voice. He looked at Hermione and asked, "What are you doing, Hermione?" He had to keep her talking.

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“Oh, I’m not doing anything,” said Hermione, smiling. There was a mad glint in her eyes. “It does everything by itself now.”

“What are you—”

“You never were all that good at listening in school,” Hermione said. “Potions was good, sometimes. Did you know that part-Veelas react very differently to a lot of potions than a regular human?”

The colour drained from Harry’s face. “You *were* poisoning him,” he whispered.

“Not quite,” Hermione said. “For a human, the potion would have been a harmless painkiller and help for healing. For a Veela, or part-Veela, however, the draught works *very* differently. It destroys the pain by severing the contact between the body and the soul. So the body still feels the pain, but the soul doesn’t. Problem is that if you take it for too long, it will separate your body and soul entirely and they won’t be able to patch themselves together again. That’s why it’s called the Draught of the Dementors by the Veelas. It takes the Veela’s soul away.”

Harry felt sick. He’d helped Hermione, albeit unknowingly, in her sick schemes. He should have checked the potion more carefully – he should have listened in potions.

Hermione continued without noticing the rage building up within Harry, or perhaps she did and she didn’t care. “I’m going to exchange Malfoy’s soul for Ron’s.”

“You can’t bring back the dead,” Harry said, his voice shaking.

“Don’t you want him back? I saw how tortured you were, Harry,” Hermione said taking a few steps towards him again. “We loved him. There were so many who loved him. It was never fair that Malfoy got to live and Ron died – and today, I’m going to correct that.”

“Life isn’t fair!” Harry said to her. “Ron is dead, you have to accept that.”

“No!” Hermione snarled at him and whirled back to Draco. She raised her wand and pointed it at Draco at the same time as she started chanting.

“You were the one who blew up our apartment, too,” Harry said loudly, wanting to – needing to – disrupt her spell.

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Hermione lowered her wand and glared at Harry. “I was frustrated. You quit with the potion and I was tired of waiting. I wanted him dead. Making a bomb was simple enough.”

“You nearly killed me instead,” Harry said.

Hermione frowned. “You weren’t supposed to go in there. If you had just stayed outside, none of this would have happened.”

“But why kill him? You wouldn’t have been able to bring Ron back. And where does Mona fit into everything?”

He kept his eyes on Hermione, who was now turned towards him again. In the corner of his eye, he saw Draco stir again, moving slightly. It got his hopes up; as long as Draco was moving he was still alive.

“Ah, Mona,” Hermione said and she smirked in a fashion that was eerily like Draco’s. “She was my protégé.” At Harry’s frown, she continued, “At Hogwarts. You wouldn’t remember, but in our seventh year, she was in her third year and she was quite— troublesome. Had problems at home and in school. I was assigned to help her out and she became better. But then he—“ she whirled around and pointed at Draco again “—killed Ron and I stopped helping her. She became worse and was thrown out of Hogwarts after beating up one of the other girls in her year. She didn’t fare any better in the Muggle world – she wouldn’t shut up about the Magical world and Hogwarts, and she was subsequently placed in psychiatric care. It was just a coincidence that she happened to have a crush on ‘Harry Evans’ and that she stumbled into our lives so timely.”

“Yes, I bet it fit in well with your plans,” Harry spat at her. “Someone to blame things on.”

Hermione shrugged.

Harry continued, “But then she became ‘troublesome’ again when she found out about your plan to kill Draco.”

“She was ungrateful,” Hermione said, narrowing her eyes. “She always was. In school, I helped her bring up her grades and she thanked me by beating up a fellow student. After your apartment blew up, I offered her a place to stay when the police started looking for her and she thanked me by running away to *you* to tell you of my ‘evil plans’.”

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“So you found her and stopped her from talking by cursing her,” Harry said, letting his disgust show. “Is she dead?”

“Yes,” Hermione said simply, not sounding the least bit bothered by it. Then she snapped, “Enough talking. It is not what we’re here for.”

She walked over to the other side of the room and brought out her wand again. Mumbling a spell, a large casket suddenly came floating through the air. Harry swallowed. He had a feeling he knew what – or rather, *who* – was in that casket.

He noticed Hermione’s hands were shaking as she brought the casket into the middle of the room, directly in front of the structure where Draco was bound.

From the floor, Harry heard a soft sigh. He looked down to see Darius’ eyelashes fluttering, but then he went still again.

Hermione walked over to Draco and brought her hand up to cup his bruised cheek, the gesture almost loving.

“And now,” she hissed at him, “you die.”

She flicked her wand and the lid of the casket came off. Harry nearly threw up as he saw the body of his former best friend, frozen in time. Ron’s hair was still the vivid Weasley-red, his skin pale and lightly freckled. His lips were blue, his whole body still. He was dead; why couldn’t Hermione see and accept this?

Still, a part of him wondered if it was possible. Could they bring him back? Could it work?

Another flick of her wand and Ron was lifted from the casket, hanging freely a foot up in the air. Hermione flicked her wand and the robe covering Draco’s upper body disappeared. Hermione brought out her knife again and placed it at Draco’s left shoulder.

“No!” Harry screamed, struggling against his binds.

A pained grasp and weak struggling came from Draco as Hermione drew the knife from the left shoulder to the right as she chanted. Blood started pouring out of the wound, dripping down onto the floor. Then Hermione took the knife and cut from the base of his throat down to his navel. Harry felt sick, the need to throw up strong. He continued to fight for his freedom, but the binds held him.

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Hermione moved back and over to Ron.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered and slashed his wrist, just barely. No blood came; it was frozen with Ron’s body.

Hermione stepped away, chanting in a language Harry didn’t recognize. Her eyes were closed. Slowly, Ron and Draco began moving closer together, drawn by magic. The blood dripping from Draco’s body splattered on the ground and light started coming from it. It was soon blinding and Harry felt his eyes watering. He would not look away.

Suddenly, Draco’s body seemed to be splitting. The light, the life, left Draco’s body and it slumped down as his soul was drawn out.

“No!” Harry screamed, fighting to be free.

Another form was coming up from the light and Harry recognized Ron’s form.

Then all of a sudden, a form leaped from the ground and tackled Hermione. Darius had woken up.

Hermione fell to the ground, screaming.

“No! Not now! *Noo!*” she yelled fighting Darius. The knife cut through Darius’ chest and he screamed.

The forms of Draco and Ron’s souls seemed oblivious to the fight going on. They seemed to be looking at each other. Ron was— smiling? Harry wasn’t sure, but it looked like it. Tears filled Harry’s eyes as Ron turned to him instead.

*‘I never blamed you.’* Harry heard Ron’s voice in his head; it was telepathy because Ron’s lips weren’t moving. *‘You were the best friend anyone could have.’*

“Ron!” Hermione screamed, her attention on him for a second. Darius took the opportunity to land a punch over her face.

Ron turned to Hermione and looked at her coldly. *‘You are not yourself,’* he said to her. *‘This is wrong. He is not the man who murdered me.’*

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Her eyes widened. “He is!” she screamed. “He lured you outside and killed you! Then he left school! He was guilty!” Her voice was hoarse with tears.

Ron shook his head at her. *‘No, he wasn’t. The only thing he’s guilty of is wanting to be my friend.’*

“No!” Hermione screamed, pushing Darius off. Darius was momentarily stunned when he slammed his head on the ground.

*‘Now I have to return,’* Ron said. *‘Do not try this again. I do not wish to be brought back. I had a good life and wonderful friends; my wishes for my life was fulfilled.’*

“No,” Hermione said, her voice suddenly hoarse. “No, no, you can’t leave! I need you! I—”

Ron smiled at her. *‘We’ll be together soon, Hermione. I loved you, too.’*

Then he began sinking into the light on the ground again. With a last hand movement, he pushed Draco’s soul. Draco’s soul seemed to stumble back into his body, absorbed at once.

“No!” Hermione screamed, falling to the ground, her fists slamming into the ground, where the light disappeared more and more until it was gone and the room became dark again. She sobbed, “No...”

“Hermione, release us, it’s over,” Harry said pleadingly. “It’s over.”

She looked up and he was frightened by the madness in her eyes. “No, it’s not over! He’s guilty! He did all this!”

She got to her feet and pointed her wand at Draco again. “*Crucio!*”

A hoarse scream rippled through Draco’s throat and his body shook under the curse.

Myra was crying and screaming herself, as much as the body bind would allow her to.

Then she was thrown aside again as Darius charged at her again. The wand fell from her hand and landed just next to Harry. Hermione struggled against Darius, trying to push the knife through him again. She swung her other arm at Darius in a try to punch him. He was bleeding profoundly from the knife wound she’d given him earlier and didn’t have time to duck. He staggered away from her, almost falling to his knees, but picking himself up just before his knees touched the ground.

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With one last gathering of strength, he launched himself at her.

The room suddenly went very quiet.

Hermione staggered back. The knife was deeply imbedded in her chest and blood was pouring from the wound. She tripped over her wand and fell to the floor, hitting her head hard on the stonewall. Groggily, she struggled to sit up, to get her wand and heal herself. But she didn't reach it; instead, she fell back again and lay still on the ground. The blood pooled around her.

Darius fell to his knees, both hands grasping his chest, his breathing laboured.

"Darius!" Harry yelled at him.

"Harry," he whispered.

Hermione's magic was weakening and suddenly, the binds holding Harry released him. Myra was set free from her body bind and she crawled over to Darius.

"No—" she whispered, taking him in her arms and pressing her hand against his chest. "No, no, no."

"I'll be— fine," Darius whispered to her. "Don't worry— about me—"

She cried, her tears falling on Darius' face.

"I love you," he whispered, his eyes closing.

"No! Darius! Don't say that! Don't— you're not—" she sobbed, holding his lifeless body closer.

Harry ran over to Draco's side. "Draco."

Draco's eyelids fluttered open. "Harry," he whispered, before he closed them again. "I'm sorry— I shouldn't have— brought you into this—"

Harry brought out his wand and unlocked the chains holding Draco. He slumped forward into Harry's arms.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“Stay awake, just stay awake,” Harry said to him, holding him tightly against his chest.

“I love you.”

Harry closed his eyes and held back a sob. Crying wouldn't help.

“Harry, help him!” Myra cried from her place next to Darius. Harry saw Darius' unconscious form in her arms, bleeding just as much as Draco was.

“Hold him a moment longer and I'll be back in a second,” Harry said.

Then he Apparated, hoping that he still had enough magic within to do it.

The ward of St Mungo's was busy. “Help me!” he screamed and everyone stopped. Within seconds, Healers had come up to him and they took Draco out of Harry's arms. Two Aurors came to him as well and he begged them to come with him. He told them where they were to Apparate to and a second later, Harry found himself with the two Aurors back in Hermione's room.

“Take them to St Mungo's,” Harry said, pointing at Myra and Darius. “He was stabbed by a knife. And send more Aurors here.”

The Aurors nodded. Without asking any questions, they took Myra and Darius in their arms – Myra still sobbing and Darius unconscious – and Apparated away.

Harry walked over to Hermione, slowly, his feet feeling heavy like lead. He had to get back to St Mungo's, but he couldn't do it before he knew that Hermione was truly dead.

She was still breathing shallowly, her chest heaving. Blood was still oozing from her wound.

“Now you'll get to be with him,” he said.

She looked up at him and her eyes were suddenly clearer, the madness that had filled them before now gone or at least diminished.

“I'm sorry, Harry,” she said.

Harry closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again. “Not nearly as sorry as I am.”

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She grasped for him and he took her hand, not quite sure of why he was doing it, but doing it nonetheless. She attempted a smile at him, but it came out more as a grimace. Then she drew a last, shuddering breath before her body went completely still. The hand in Harry's became limp.

"Good bye, Hermione," Harry said, placing a hand over her eyes and closing her eyelids. Then he stood up, feeling more exhausted than he had ever before.

He Apparated away, knowing that the Aurors would take care of everything else. Now he had to get to Draco. His heart filled with dread of what he would find at St Mungo's. Flashes of Darius and Draco ran through his mind.

He arrived at the same place as he'd been before, the people still milling about.

"Mr. Potter," said a woman, tapping his shoulder gently.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news."

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Chapter twenty-five*

### *Come back to me*

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“I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

The woman looked truly sorry.

“What?” Harry asked, his breath hitching. He didn’t want to know the answer to the question. “Is he still alive?”

She nodded. “But only barely. The Healers would like to know if some sort of curse was placed upon him.”

Harry nodded and with a shaking voice, he told the woman about the soul-and-body separating spell Hermione had performed, as well as the Cruciatius. She nodded and asked him to come with her.

“Can I see him?” Harry asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “He’s in a Healing Sleep right now and only if he’s stable enough will you be able to see him.”

“Stable?” Harry asked, but she didn’t answer. She opened a door for him and motioned for him to go inside. Two Healers were standing in there, waiting for him.

“Mr. Potter,” one of them said, stretching her hand out to him.

Harry, however, was staring at the other man. “Neville?”

“Harry.” Neville Longbottom smiled slightly at him.

“How is he?”

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“Not good, Harry,” Neville answered. “He’s not responding right to any of our potions and spells.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “What have you given him?”

“The normal healing potions,” Neville said.

Harry shook his head at him. “No, you can’t. He’s a part-Veela, don’t you know that? He won’t respond right to medication made for humans.”

Neville looked at his partner, who nodded. “I’ll go get the Veela potions.”

She left the room together with the woman who’d led Harry there. Harry turned to Neville. “How is Darius?”

“He’s the one who got stabbed, right?” Neville asked and Harry nodded. “Wait and I’ll check.”

He brought up a piece of parchment and wrote Darius’ name. The writing was absorbed and other writing appeared.

“He is stabilized and currently resting,” Neville told him. “Would you like me to take you there? You won’t be allowed to see Draco for a while yet.”

Harry thought for a second before he asked, “Will you come get me as soon as I can?”

Neville smiled gently. “Of course.”

“Then I’d like to see Darius.”

Neville showed him to the fire at the other end of the room. “Let’s take the quick way.”

They floo-ed through St Mungo’s private network and Harry landed, as he always did, in a heap on the floor. Neville stood grinning next to him and offered him a hand to get up. Harry couldn’t help but think of how much he had changed.

Suddenly a light started blinking in Neville’s pocket. “Oh, I have to go,” he said. “Darius’ room is just down the corridor to your right.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

Harry nodded.

He walked silently through the corridor. He was just about to go into Darius' room when he heard voices.

"I'm so glad you're all right."

Harry hesitated. Instead of walking into the room, he peeked around the corner.

Myra and Darius were completely absorbed in each other. Myra sat on the side of Darius' bed, her hand on Darius' cheek.

"I was so scared."

Darius just smiled at her. Harry wondered if they'd dosed him with enough potions to think he'd died and gone to heaven; he certainly looked like it.

"Don't ever do anything like that to me again," Myra whispered.

Darius lifted himself an inch off the bed and quieted Myra with a kiss. Myra gasped, surprised, but then her hands came up on either side of Darius' face and she leaned into it. Darius groaned as his newly healed wound was aggravated and Myra pulled back.

But Darius just smiled and brought his hand up to cup Myra's face.

Harry pulled back and sank down on the floor, his body heavy. They didn't need him there, not right now. Right now, they had each other and he would be like a third wheel. He was happy for his friends, he really was, but he couldn't help but feel alone. So very, very alone.

He leaned his head back against the wall, letting his hair fall into his eyes. He looked at his hands. They were still covered with Hermione's and Draco's blood.

Draco.

*"Harry. I'm sorry— I shouldn't have— brought you into this."*

Harry squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Didn't Draco realise that Harry would do anything for him?

## *The Depths of Winter*

*"I love you."*

Harry hadn't even said the words back to Draco. He should have, he knew he should have. What if Draco didn't wake up? What if Harry never got to tell him? Why had he waited? What had he been afraid of? That Draco didn't love him back? Why would that matter? Harry would still love him, whether or not Draco loved him.

"I am so stupid," he whispered hoarsely and ran his hands through his hair, tears filling his eyes but none spilling down his cheeks. He wouldn't cry. That would make it seem as though he'd given up hope. He just said again, "I am so, so stupid."

Exhausted from the last twenty-four hours' events, he lay down on his side in the empty corridor and closed his eyes. His body felt like it was made of lead; he couldn't have made himself move for anything – anything but Draco.

His heart was bleeding.

He was so tired.

*"I love you."*

\*

He was awoken by Neville.

"Good morning," he said gently.

Harry sat up groggily and looked around the dark corridor. "What time is it?"

"It's in the middle of the night."

Harry suddenly remembered where he was and why. "Draco?"

"That's why I'm here," Neville said. "You can come see him now."

"Is he awake?" Harry asked, his heart filling with hope.

## *The Depths of Winter*

Neville shook his head, his eyes sad, crushing Harry's sudden hope. "He's still in the Healing sleep," he said. "Harry – we're not sure that he will ever wake up again."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, then forced himself to look at Neville. "He will. He has to." His voice broke on the last words.

Neville reached out a hand and helped him up. "Come on."

They floo-ed again, to yet another room. Harry had no idea of where in St Mungo's they were and he didn't really care. He only wanted to see Draco.

Neville led him down two dark corridors before he turned and held open a door for Harry. "In here."

Harry nodded. "Thank you."

Neville gave him a small smile and said, "Of course," and then he left.

Harry walked into the dark room, his hands shaking.

Draco lay still on the bed before him. He was dressed in a white St Mungo's gown. It didn't quite hide the gauze covering his torso, nor did it in any way hide the gauze covering Draco's cheek. He looked unearthly, his skin too pale, except where it was beaten blue.

"Oh god," Harry mumbled and hurried over to Draco's side.

With trembling hands, he took Draco's frail looking one in his. It was limp, unresponsive, and reminded Harry too much of Hermione's dead fingers.

"Please come back to me," he whispered, gently squeezing Draco's hand.

But Draco lay still, his breathing even and light, never noticing Harry's presence.

Harry slumped down in a chair without letting go of Draco's hand.

\*

## *The Depths of Winter*

Myra entered cautiously.

Harry looked up at her. He felt dead inside.

“Hey,” she said and tried to smile. Her eyes flitted over to Draco and she held back a gasp.

“Hey,” Harry said.

“How is he?”

Harry looked at Draco and spoke quietly. “Not good. The Healers are fearing that he won’t wake up at all.” He met her eyes. “She didn’t just cut him and beat him; she cursed him as well.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder and he closed his eyes.

“How is Darius?” he asked, wanting to speak about something else.

“He’s getting better,” Myra said. “They are ‘healing’ him.”

Harry looked at her. “You think all of this is very strange, don’t you?”

“That magic exists? Well, I can’t say that it is something I expected and it doesn’t go with the logical side of me. It is— weird.” She looked as though she couldn’t quite put words to her feelings, which was quite unusual when it came to her. Then again, it wasn’t a usual situation. “I keep thinking that I’m going to wake up and it will all be a dream. I mean, a hidden society in London? A magical school? Wizards and witches? It sounds rather like a good novel.”

“Indeed,” Harry said. “Perhaps you understand now why I was so reluctant to tell you about my past before?”

Myra smiled slightly. “Yes, perhaps I can understand that a little.”

She pulled a chair up and sat down next to Harry.

“I sort of understand now,” Harry said suddenly, “what Hermione felt. About Ron, I mean. About wanting to do anything to get the one you love back. It is frightening, but it is there.”

“You won’t turn into her,” Myra reassured her. “Because he won’t die.”

## *The Depths of Winter*

She squeezed his hand, trying to comfort him as much as possible. Harry hoped with all his might that she was right.

\*

*Harry Potter saves Muggles and old school rival*

*Harry Potter, also known as Harry Evans in the Muggle world, has once again saved the day. A former friend of Potter's, Hermione Granger, kidnapped Draco Malfoy (all three former students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry). Malfoy was accused of being a Death Eater and murdering Ronald Weasley several years ago, but was cleared of all charges by Hogwarts' former Headmaster, the late Albus Dumbledore.*

*Granger attempted an ancient spell to bring Weasley back, using Malfoy's soul in exchange.*

*"We do not know exactly what happened," says Auror Angelina Johnson. "The soul exchange didn't work and Mr. Malfoy is currently at St Mungo's Hospital. We are still investigating the exact events that took place."*

*Sources tell the Daily Prophet that Granger has been trying to find Malfoy for years, although no one knew that her hatred had grown so strong.*

*"We thought she wanted to speak with him, to get his side of the events," says one source who chooses to remain anonymous. "I had no idea she wanted to kill him. I would, of course, have taken action if I'd known."*

*Apparently Potter contacted Granger several months ago for help, which is how she found him. Malfoy went underground after the murder of Ronald Weasley and hasn't been seen in the Wizarding world since.*

*Two Muggles, Myra Pryderi and Darius Aldén, were also involved. The two are said to be Potter's friends, but their exact involvement has not been explained yet. Aldén is currently also under St Mungo's care after being stabbed by the same knife that Granger used in her attempt to revive her dead best friend. Pryderi and Aldén*

## *The Depths of Winter*

*have both chosen not to comment on the Daily Prophet's information, as has Potter.*

*'A third body was found in the chambers next to the one where Granger's and Weasley's bodies were found; Miss Desdemona D'Razi. D'Razi is also a former student at Hogwarts, who was expelled in the beginning of her fourth year. The Daily Prophet has yet to find why she was expelled. D'Razi's involvement with Granger's plots has not yet been revealed.*

*"At this stage, there isn't much we know for sure," Auror Johnson continues. "We have yet to speak to Mr. Malfoy, as he still hasn't woken up."*

*'The Daily Prophet has also learned that Potter and Malfoy have been living together for the last three months. After an accident in the Muggle world, Malfoy was paralysed from the waist down and has been confined to a Muggle wheelchair (see page 4 for detailed information on Muggle wheelchairs and paralysis), unable to use his legs. The exact nature of the relationship between Potter and Malfoy has not yet been revealed, as Potter has chosen to stay silent on that subject as well.'*

Harry stopped reading.

Four days had passed since Hermione's death. Harry had spoken to at least six different Aurors, one of them Angelina, about the events that had taken place. They had interviewed Myra and Darius as well, but neither of them had much to add to Harry's story and since they were 'mere Muggles', most of the weight was placed on Harry's retelling.

What he hadn't told them about was Ron's soul speaking to them. It didn't have any bearing to the Aurors' case and it was too personal. For four days, the words Ron had said to him had echoed through his mind.

*'I never blamed you. You were the best friend anyone could have.'*

His heart had broken and mended at the same time with those words. Ron had told him that he wasn't to blame. After years of thinking that it was his fault, that he should have protected his best friend better, it was hard to hear.

The Aurors had collected Hermione's body and taken her wand. The body of Desdemona D'Razi had been found in a room next door to where Hermione had held Draco, Harry, Myra and Darius prisoner. Ron's body had been taken to be buried for real this time. No one knew

## *The Depths of Winter*

how Hermione had managed to get a hold of the body in the first place, but the general theories were that she'd taken it either before the funeral or in the chaos that followed the final battle.

It didn't matter anymore.

Ron had said, *'We'll be together soon, Hermione. I loved you, too,'* and now they were together. Harry wondered if Ron had known what was going to happen. Perhaps time didn't exist in death, the way it did in life.

Most magazines and newspapers, from *The Daily Prophet* to *The Quibbler* and *Teen Witch* were filled to the brim with articles like the one he'd just been reading. Some articles were more accurate than others – *The Daily Prophet* had stayed unusually true to the real thing this time while *Teen Witch* accompanied the article with old shots of Harry on a broom, playing Seeker for the Gryffindor team, making the girls swoon yet again, even though he didn't look like that anymore.

"They're writing about us," Harry said. "All the different papers and crappy magazines."

He sat in Draco's room, just as he had for the last four days. His voice was quiet as he spoke, as though he wanted to talk to Draco yet at the same time, he didn't want to disturb his peace. "They're saying that I saved the day again. Me. They're wrong about that, but Darius is a 'mere Muggle', so he couldn't do anything heroic, could he?"

He laughed hoarsely.

"I didn't do anything. I was thrown into a wall, I was trapped and I didn't do a thing to try to get out. I am pathetic."

He trailed off and watched Draco, his thumb stroking over the top of Draco's hand.

"I finished the book," he said after a while. "My book. Our book. You should have half the credit. You were my inspiration, my reason for writing it. I didn't want to tell you about it because I didn't want you to see it before it was perfect. Perfect like you."

Again, he let the words die out and silence fill the room. He watched the rise and fall of Draco's chest, listened to the soft sound of his breathing.

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“You need to wake up,” Harry said when the silence became too much. “You have so much left to do. *We* have so much left to do. We have to go explore the world, you have to read my book, you need to open that café Myra suggested so that everyone in the world can eat your delicious desserts. We need to get to know each other and I will fall even harder for you than I already have. I love you, you know. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before, but I do. I love you so much.”

His voice broke.

“Just please wake up, Draco,” he whispered and looked hopefully at Draco. But Draco’s eyes remained closed, his hand still in Harry’s. Harry closed his eyes and placed a kiss on Draco’s hand.

There was a knock on the door. Harry called for the visitor to come in.

Darius was seated in a chair that was hovering a foot off the ground; the Wizarding world’s wheelchair.

“Hey,” he greeted softly.

“Hey,” Harry said. Attempting a joke, he said, “Did Myra actually let you out of her sight?”

Darius smiled slightly. “She’s outside.”

“Of course,” Harry said. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” Darius said. “Healer Martin says I will get to go home in a few days.”

“That’s great,” Harry said. He tried to sound enthusiastic, but he had a feeling that he was failing miserably. Still, he felt the strong need to keep the conversation going – and either way, he had to find out if Myra and Darius were an item or not for real now. It was as good a time as any to ask.

Darius flushed at the question and couldn’t keep the grin off his lips. That was enough of an answer for Harry.

“I never thought she’d actually...” Darius said, trailing off dreamily. “She’s too good for me, I still think so. But she seems to think I’m good enough, so who knows.”

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Silence spread in the room. It wasn't comfortable, but it wasn't uncomfortable, either. Harry's attention was on Draco, his thoughts drifting through memories of them together, ignoring Darius to the point where he forgot he was in the room.

"Were you scared?" Darius asked, looking at Harry.

Harry was startled out of his reverie and turned to Darius. "Yes," he said, his voice a mere whisper. "I still am."

"I was terrified," Darius said, his voice quieter than usual. "I was in shock, too, I think I still am a bit. A magical world, right here, in London – it was hard to grasp. Even now, after you've told us more about it, it is still quite— amazing."

"I'm sorry that your first meeting with it was so— violent and unpleasant," Harry said softly, looking Darius in the eye. "I'm sorry I brought you into this at all; it isn't your world, you shouldn't have had to deal with my god-awful past."

"Hey," Darius said, moving up towards Harry and placing a hand on Harry's shoulder, "none of that. Myra already had this discussion with you – we're friends, this is what friends do. We help each other."

Harry didn't have the energy in him to start an argument with him.

"Besides, if you hadn't taken us with you, you might be dead now," Darius continued. He shuddered at the thought and Harry realised that it was true. He hadn't thought about that; he'd only thought of how he'd brought his friends in harm's way. "And I would still be pining after Myra, too scared to actually make a move."

Harry attempted a smile at him. Perhaps Darius was right.

"I'm still sorry," he said quietly.

"No harm done," Darius said, another gentle smile directed towards Harry.

Harry glanced pointedly at the hover-chair Darius was sitting in.

"No *permanent* harm done," Darius said, rolling his eyes. He nodded towards Draco as he continued. "So how is he?"

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Harry looked at Draco's pale face, still half covered in gauze. "He's..." He trailed off, his eyes widening. "Draco?"

Draco emitted a soft sigh and Harry felt the hand he was holding move just slightly.

"Draco," he said again, his voice filled with hope. "Come on, Draco, you can do it. You can wake up."

Darius was watching, hovering closer to the bed. "Is he—"

Harry looked up at Darius briefly and nodded. "I think so."

They both turned to Draco. Harry saw as he moved his head just a fraction to the side, his eyelids fluttering.

"Come on," Harry mumbled again, "you can do it."

As though encouraged by Harry's words, Draco's eyelashes fluttered again, another sigh, a pained one this time, falling from his lips. Then he blinked and opened his eyes.

"Draco," said Harry and cupped his cheek gently.

Draco closed his eyes again, squeezing them shut.

Harry looked at Darius. "Go get a Healer," he said. "Or tell Myra to find one."

Darius nodded and turned his chair around, floating out of the room.

"arry," Draco mumbled, his eyes still closed. He leaned into Harry's touch.

"Shh, take it easy, take it slow, I'm here," Harry mumbled. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Draco's forehead.

"urts," Draco said, his eyes opening slightly.

"I know, you've been through the ringer for real this time," Harry said, his eyes filling with tears; happy tears. "They're getting the Healers now, so they'll give you something that will make the pain go away, okay?"

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Draco gave a tiny, barely-there nod. “You— stay,” he mumbled.

“Of course I’ll stay,” Harry said. “I’ll stay always and forever, I promise. I love you.”

“ove you too,” Draco mumbled and closed his eyes again, dozing off.

When the Healers came, Harry kept his promise to Draco; he never left his side.

# *The Depths of Winter*

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## *Epilogue*

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Harry and Draco's first decision had been to continue to stay away from the Wizarding world, but it turned out that that would not be possible. Because of the articles in *The Daily Prophet* and all the other magazines, many of Harry's old friends came to St Mungo's to see him.

"I've missed you," said Neville's wife, Ginny Longbottom, formerly Weasley. Her eyes were filled with tears as she hugged him, holding him tightly. "Don't you ever leave like that again."

"Sorry," Harry said, feeling guilty. Not all that he had left behind had been bad.

He was introduced to Ginny and Neville's son, an energetic toddler named Michael Ronald Longbottom, with hair as red as his mother's. Michael took an instant liking to Draco. Harry was surprised to see that Ginny just smiled fondly at this, rather than throwing a fit. In fact, both Ginny and Neville were taking Draco's presence with surprising – and suspicious – calm.

Ginny's mother, Molly Weasley, was also in tears as she hugged Harry. She went between scolding him for leaving them without so much as a note, joy of seeing him again and tears of both happiness and sadness because of all the memories he brought forth.

When she turned to Draco, still lying on the hospital bed, quietly watching the reunion, her eyes filled with more tears.

"Draco Malfoy," she said and Harry wasn't quite sure of what Mrs. Weasley felt about his boyfriend. He moved closer to them, but then she pulled Draco into a tight hug as well, holding him close until he was choking. "Oh, I'm sorry dear," she said then and pulled away. "I just never thought I'd see you again."

Harry looked at Draco, frowning slightly.

"She helped me when I fled," Draco said, seeing his expression. "She helped me long before that, as did Ginny." He blushed suddenly and didn't continue.

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Harry's frown deepened and he looked questioningly at Ginny.

"He saved my life back in my fifth year," she said. Harry was surprised; he hadn't had a clue. This apparently showed on his face, because Ginny continued, "No, you don't know about it. No one but us were there."

"What happened?"

Ginny smiled slightly. "I'd just been down in the kitchens and got some food. I was walking back to the Gryffindor Tower, chewing on nuts, when I suddenly tripped on one of the stairs. A piece of nut got stuck in my throat and I was choking. Then Draco of all people came walking. He decided—" she glanced at Draco "—that even a Muggle-lover such as me didn't deserve to choke to death. So he performed the Heimlich Manoeuvre on me."

Harry stared, his mouth slightly open, first at Ginny, then at Draco, with an 'are you serious' look on his face.

Draco blushed under his stare and looked down on the sheets before him.

"I told mum, who decided that Draco's heart hadn't been completely blackened yet and she became completely set on helping him over to our side instead. Little by little, she and I managed to make him see that we weren't as bad as he first thought." Ginny smiled gently at Draco.

Harry smiled at Draco, who was still looking down, studying his hands. He reached out and ran his hand through Draco's hair, down to cup his chin in his hand.

"So that is how Draco Malfoy, Muggle hater and future Death Eater, saved the life of Ginny Weasley, Muggle lover and Harry Potter fan, with a manoeuvre that Muggles first came up with, and became an honorary Weasley, just like you are," Ginny said, her smile widening as she looked from Draco to Harry. "Life is ironic sometimes."

Harry nodded slowly. "Indeed it is," he said, thinking of the many twist and turns his life had taken, like a never-ending rollercoaster.

As he bent down and placed a kiss on Draco's lips, however, he had the feeling that the biggest adventure had yet to start.

## *The Depths of Winter*

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“So what exactly happened – how exactly did Hermione manage to kidnap you?” Myra asked, slurping on a newly made smoothie. Her hand trailed lazily through Darius’ dark hair.

They were sitting almost identically in the way they’d sat on the night of the house warming party; Harry sitting on one couch with Draco’s head in his lap, Myra lying on the other couch and Darius on the floor. Her motions were far more loving now than they had been back then however, and when Darius told her that he loved her – which he did quite a few times – she believed him rather than brushed it off as drunken talk.

Draco shrugged slightly, his eyes closed as he spoke. “She just Apparated there and took me.”

“Apparated?” Myra asked. “That’s the thing where you just disappear and appear somewhere else, right?”

Harry nodded. There had been a lot of explaining going on the last few days. Myra was very interested in magic and how it worked; her logical mind wanted to understand it. Darius was simply fascinated with the idea of being able to make things float. Harry was planning on taking them to Diagon Alley and then to a Quidditch match, and perhaps even to Hogwarts, so that they could see more of what magic could do, beyond what Harry and Draco could show with their wands.

Because now truly cleared of all charges and finally able to move freely in the Wizarding world as well as the Muggle one, Draco bought a new wand. He liked to play with it and see how much he remembered. He sparred with Harry, trying to recall as many nasty spells as possible.

“Yeah, it is,” Draco said. “Then she took me to the room where you found us and beat me, screaming at me that I was finally going to get what I deserved and that everything that was wrong would finally be set right.”

“She was insane,” Harry said. “Her love for Ron drove her insane.”

Harry met Myra’s eyes as he said this. He smiled slightly at her, remembering their conversation at the hospital before Draco had woken up, and trying to reassure her that he wasn’t insane as well. She smiled back, knowingly.

## *The Depths of Winter*

“I don’t remember that much of what happened after that, until I woke up at St Mungo’s,” Draco said. “The Aurors didn’t have much use of me.”

Draco looked up at Harry. “Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask,” he said. “How is it that the Aurors and you could Apparate into the room from St Mungo’s to pick Myra and Darius up, when the place was so safely warded that it wouldn’t even show up with a location spell an hour earlier?”

Harry said, “The wards were linked to Hermione. When she was injured, her magic drained away and both the spells holding us prisoner and the wards keeping everyone else out fell.”

“How did you find me when she had wards up?” Draco asked.

Harry looked down at him, at first hesitating to answer for some reason. “I called upon the blood we shared,” he said finally.

Draco paled. “You know about that—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Harry asked softly. “You saved my life.”

Draco seemed just as hesitant as Harry to answer the question, but after a few moments of closed eyes, he said, “You’d just saved me. For the second time, might I add. You saved my life the day of the accident and you saved it again by going into a burning building to get me...” He trailed off, his eyes cast down, away from Harry. “I didn’t want you to think that I only did it as repayment.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you did,” Harry said, cupping Draco’s cheek in his hand. “But really, a blood bind – you don’t think it would have been a better idea to tell me?”

Draco shrugged.

“What does a blood bind do, anyway?” asked Darius.

“Well,” said Harry, “for a Muggle such as yourself, it’s only a blood exchange. A few hundred years ago, best friends did it with each other, to show that they were ‘brothers’. For a wizard or witch, however, you can combine the blood exchange with a spell.”

“I gave Harry some of my strength, to keep him alive,” Draco said, continuing to explain. “They’d gotten his heart going again, but he was still terribly weak and he was disappearing

## *The Depths of Winter*

again. So I did the exchange and performed the spell. It is an old ritual, to create a bond between two people so that they are able to share strength and sense each other.”

“Did you do a spell while the doctors and nurses were working on him as well?” asked Myra. “One of the nurses said you were mumbling and that there was ‘an aura of strength’ or something around you.”

Draco nodded. “I did,” he said. “It was another strengthening spell.”

The four fell silent, their thoughts straying away in different directions. Harry’s mind went over the last few months, from the accident, to the bombing of the apartment, to Hermione’s subsequent death. He didn’t like to think of Hermione on the day of her death. He tried to only think of how she’d been back in school, before Ron had been murdered. That was when she’d been the genius girl with the highest grades in her year, with bushy hair and warm brown eyes, who was always there for her friends when they needed her. That was the person he tried to remember, rather than the insane woman they’d encountered in the room without windows.

Waking Harry from his musings, Myra said softly, “I’m just glad we got out of it alive.”

The three men nodded in agreement.

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*Five months later*

It was a beautiful day.

Autumn had come and with it the trees exploded in colourful fireworks, creating a calm, cool and beautiful view. A lonely bird sang, sounding wistful now that summer was over.

Harry Potter walked through the park slowly, feeling anything but sad.

On his arm, a pale hand rested.

Draco Malfoy’s steps were agonizingly slow, each movement requiring power, thought and determination. There was a crease between his brows and he bit his lip unconsciously as he

## *The Depths of Winter*

moved his right foot in front of his left, his weight on both the cane in his free hand and on Harry. A pearl of sweat made its way down his cheek, despite the weather being rather cool.

“Do you need to take a break?”

Draco looked at Harry, who was watching with fascinated worry. “No,” he said, “I want to keep walking.”

It had taken months of hard training and a great deal of luck, but Harry’s promise to Draco that he would walk again had come true. Many tears had fallen down pale cheeks; tears of frustration and anger when things didn’t go as Draco wanted them to, but also of happiness and excitement when he made progress.

His goal was to be able to completely be rid of his wheelchair. They still had a long way to go to that; for now, it took all of Draco’s energy to walk a distance that a healthy person strode past in a couple of seconds.

A few minutes – two or three steps – later, all of Draco’s energy reserves had been exhausted and he agreed to sit down on one of the benches.

Harry pulled Draco closely to him and Draco happily complied, nuzzling into Harry’s shoulder. The park was almost empty for once; it was an early Wednesday afternoon and most people were working or in school.

“We are quite lucky,” said Draco, his voice quiet and content. “No jobs that we have to go to and no classes.” He looked up at Harry, smirking slightly. “Isn’t your life much better now than it was a year ago? Your new book is out, winning award upon award and being blessed by every non-homophobic critic in Britain, soon to be the world. You have no school with dumb tests and boring classes. Your friends have finally realised how well they fit together and are as we speak planning their wedding. We have opened the café so that we can eat cookies and cake at and get fat at any time. You have faced your past and earned back several friends—”

“And most important of all,” Harry said, interrupting Draco. “I have you.”

Draco flushed. Even after six months together with Harry – six sweet, incredible, wonderful months – did he seem to have problems with fully understanding just how much Harry loved him. Harry intended to spend every day for the rest of his life showing Draco. That was why he now had a small box in his pocket.

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He disentangled himself from Draco, who looked up at him, confusion written over his face.

“What is it?”

Harry didn’t answer; instead, he stood in front of Draco and dropped down on one knee. Draco’s eyes widened, grey eyes showing shock – and hope?

“You are the best thing that ever happened to me,” Harry said softly. “The most important thing of all. I quote Albert Camus when I say, *‘In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me lay an invincible summer’*. That is you; that is what you represent to me – amazing strength, invincible will, incredible love. I love you more than I could ever say in words. That is why you would make me the happiest man on the planet if you would be my husband.”

Draco stared at him for a few seconds, looking as though he tried to grasp the concept that someone – Harry! – had just asked for his hand in marriage. Then, after several long seconds when Harry’s heart hammered wildly in his chest, he broke out in a wide, rare grin, his smile lightening up the entire park. “Of course,” he breathed. “Yes, yes, I will be your husband. Of course. Yes!”

Then he pulled Harry towards him and their lips met in a searing kiss, filled with promise of a wondrous future to come.

A few months later, on the one year ‘anniversary’ of Draco’s accident, Harry and Draco exchanged rings, defying fate and making the day one filled with wonderful memories rather than bad ones.

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*The End*

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*The Depths of Winter*

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