

On Teaching and Learning

by Soul Bound

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes: This peice was written as a gift to **stellamoon** during HD Holidays 2008. It was beta'd by my dear friend **Southern_Witch_69**.

The lake at Hogwarts looked the same as it always had, which surprised Harry, considering the damage to the castle itself. Harry sat on the damp grass with his back to a large boulder, staring out at the rippling pattern of the moon reflected on the waves. Amidst tears, hugs, and handshakes, he had slipped quietly from the Great Hall and had wandered to this familiar spot. Many thoughts rushed through his mind, but the clearest was... it was over. Tonight he would sleep and know he was not hunted. A sense of relief that it was finally finished battled with the responsibility Harry felt for the damage done. If he had ended it sooner, if he had tried to keep everyone further from the fight, if, if... Harry released a shaky sigh, clenching his eyes tightly as the faces of the dead flashed one after another like a film in his mind.

The funerals would be soon, he knew. He swallowed a lump as he thought of a Weasley twin without his other half, parents who had lost a child and, worst of all, Teddy Lupin. Not a month old yet, and already he had lost so very much. Harry promised himself then and there that Teddy would not have a childhood like his own. He would never spend a single moment wondering if he was loved. Harry could at least give him that. He would be for Teddy what Sirius would have been for him if he'd had the chance.

There was much to rebuild. Everyone would be starting from scratch, healing and cleansing their lives of the poison that had infiltrated the wizarding world bit by bit. Harry knew he would do whatever he could to help, but for now... he just wanted to be still.

His thoughts drifted for an unknown length of time until he was startled by a voice calling, "Mr. Potter?"

A stab of irritation struck him as he heard footsteps coming closer, but he pushed it down as his name rang out again and he recognized the voice as McGonagall's.

"Harry, are you..."

"I'm coming back in, Professor," he said, getting to his feet. "I just... needed a moment."

He could just make out the quirk of her lips in the faint light as she said, "Take all the time you need. I just wanted a word, if it wouldn't be too much of an intrusion."

"Oh," Harry said, surprised. He shifted his feet and looked out at the lake again. "Sure. What is it?"

She was silent for a moment, watching him closely as if waiting for him to say something, and he was almost to the point of breaking the awkward silence when she spoke. "Mr. Potter, have you given any thought to your future?"

"Oh. I...I'm..." Truthfully, he hadn't given a thought to anything beyond this battle for longer than he remembered. Especially recently, expecting not to come out of it alive, the last thing on his mind had been plans for his future after his destiny had been fulfilled. He stared helplessly at his former professor, at a loss for words.

"I know that at one point, you had expressed a desire to become an Auror. Is that still something that interests you?"

Harry felt an immediate distaste that surprised him, and he was shaking his head before he even realized it. Being an Auror had sounded exciting and adventurous as a fifth-year student, but now... The idea of more chasing and fighting gave him a sense of dread. He'd had enough of all that. "No," he said. "I'm not sure what I'll do, but... not that."

"I rather thought you'd say that."

Harry shrugged and exhaled a puff of air through his nose.

"If I might... offer a suggestion?"

Harry nodded, not sure he was comfortable with the subject, but willing to let her speak. "Hogwarts is going to need help, I think. The damage has been great, as you know, but it can be repaired."

"Oh, I had already planned to help with the repairs," Harry said. "I saw the collapse in the north wing earlier..."

"Well, that's good to know, but I was referring to repairs of a different sort."

Giving her a confused look, he said, "What, like restructuring the wards?"

"No, I mean repairs to the school itself. Hogwarts will need teachers if she is to have students. The school has lost its Headmaster and a number of professors, some of whom I am not sorry to see go, as I'm sure you can imagine, but if we are to remain open, we must rebuild the staff."

"You mean... me? But...I haven't even finished my NEWTs, Professor! I can't...I'm not..."

"As I'm sure you are aware, we are, yet again, in need of a Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, and I believe you fit the bill perfectly."

Shocked, Harry could only open and close his mouth.

"I've just spoken with the board of governors...some of them, at least. It has been decided that the school will close for the rest of the current school year while we repair the damage, but will reopen on September first. I believe you would make an excellent professor, Harry. You have a natural gift for instruction, and I think it's safe to say a NEWT to prove your skills would be unnecessary at this point. If you want it, the job is yours."

"I... Professor, are you sure?"

"Quite." Harry caught a genuine smile as she turned and began to walk away. "Please let me know of your decision as soon as possible," she called over her shoulder.

He stood rooted to his spot for all of ten seconds before he chased after her. "I'll do it," he said, then felt his eyes widen as he realised what he'd promised. McGonagall beamed at him, and his stomach felt a bit queasy. The idea of teaching sounded... brilliant to him, but what if he just made things worse? He'd enjoyed leading the D.A., but teaching classes was different. His uncertainty mingled with memories from his fifth year, good and bad, giving him pause. But it was the thought of helping to make Hogwarts what it had once been that made the decision for him. "If...if you're sure," he said, biting his lip. "I don't know if I'm... but I want to help."

"Good." Her tone businesslike, she continued, "I'll need a list of the textbooks you wish your students to purchase. There's plenty of time to discuss your salary..."

"Oh, I don't..."

"But if you'll be helping with the repairs, I daresay we will have ample opportunity to work out any other details." With that, she marched off at a quick pace, leaving Harry feeling faint. He was overwhelmed, but he couldn't help feeling... happy. He wasn't sure that he had a right to be, considering where he was and what had just taken place hours before, but he felt a weight lift from his shoulders. He allowed himself to smile as he walked back towards the castle at a slow pace, more at ease than he'd been in a long time.

The funerals were a blur, and when they were over, he felt as tired as he had ever felt. Nobody had outright said they blamed him, but he had known the looks on their faces for what they were. And he couldn't disagree with them.

At the last funeral, that of Fred Weasley, Harry stood aside from the others, not sure of what to say and not even sure that he should say anything at all. He noticed several people beginning to approach him...Hermione, Ginny, Auror Robards...but he turned his head, pretending he hadn't seen them, and migrated to a different part of the room. When he saw Molly Weasley moving towards him, a lump rose in his throat. He knew that she blamed him for nothing, and that was even worse than the others blaming him for everything. A conversation with her was inevitable, needed, but at this particular moment, he didn't feel up to it.

After what he felt was a respectable time, he slipped out and retreated to Grimmauld Place, where he sat alone for several hours until Hermione and Ron joined him. Not much was said then either, but that was fine. This was the routine for several days, but the world went on outside their walls, and soon they were unable to ignore it. After less than a week holed up in the dank, old house, Mrs. Weasley practically broke down the door and promptly gathered the three of them in her arms, sobbing and scolding them for hiding and not having proper meals. Hermione decided to find her parents and restore their memories and set about packing for a trip to Australia.

Ron received a visitor in the form of his brother, George, and was gainfully employed within minutes. Harry, who had not yet told his friends of his agreement with McGonagall, pulled them both aside nervously and ended up just blurring it out.

"Harry, that's wonderful!" Hermione said with a grin.

"Yeah, mate, you'd be perfect for that. The D.A. and all."

Ron clapped Harry on the back, and after that, he felt much better about the whole thing. His friends didn't think he was crazy, so maybe it wouldn't be the disaster he was imagining. He sent an owl off to McGonagall an hour later, telling her to expect him at Hogwarts to help with the repairs tomorrow.

Figuring he'd be there until the school year started, he decided to pack his trunk with whatever he thought he might need...which turned out to be nearly everything he owned. He was attempting to shove his dress robes in between a few of his old text books when Ginny marched into his bedroom, hands on her hips. Realising that he had completely forgotten about her for the past few days, he felt both guilty and apprehensive at once.

"So," she said, "when were you planning on telling me you're going to be teaching at Hogwarts?"

News sure travels fast he thought, narrowing his eyes, and made a mental note to have a word with Ron later.

"Or were you going to tell me at all? Were you even going to say anything to me?"

Harry groaned inwardly, but replied as evenly as possible, "I was going to. I've just been... I needed some time alone here."

Ginny snorted and rolled her eyes. "Right. Ron and Hermione have been here. You weren't alone. If you didn't want see me, all you had to do was say so."

"I didn't want to see anyone," he gritted out. "Ron and Hermione don't count."

"No, they never do," she spat.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you."

They glared at each other, Harry infuriated that she was being so unreasonable, until he noticed her lower lip trembling and held up his hands with a defeated sigh. "Look, Gin, I wasn't trying to ignore you. I've just had a lot on my mind, you know?"

She sniffed and crossed her arms. "Didn't you want to see me at all?" Her tone was almost a plea.

"I... of course," he replied, wanting to head her off before she got going. "It is good to see you." He moved to her and pulled her into a tentative hug. "How have you been?" he said into her hair.

At this, she broke down into sobs, and Harry froze, cursing silently and wondering if he was some sort of magnet for crying women. He patted her back awkwardly, not sure of what else he was supposed to do.

"I'm just... glad you're okay." The words came between hitched sobs. "You're alive... and I'm alive, and now we can be together."

He could feel her fingers digging into his arms, and he grimaced. "Gin... I'm..." He wasn't entirely certain what he was going to say, but before he was able to get any more words out, she pressed her lips to his. He was too surprised to kiss back at first, but she seemed to take that as an invitation to kiss him harder. He pulled back to breathe for a moment and to ask her to loosen her grip on him, as her nails were gauging him rather painfully. "Ginny, maybe we..."

"Ginny!" called Mrs. Weasley from the hall. Harry removed himself from Ginny's grasp and backed away as her mother appeared in the doorway. She informed her daughter that they were leaving, and Ginny looked at Harry as if she wanted him to intervene, but... he really needed to pack.

After Mrs. Weasley walked away, Harry allowed Ginny to give him one more kiss, this time making sure to kiss her back, and ushered her to the door, breathing a sigh of what felt like relief.

"Owl me?" she asked with a hopeful smile.

"Of course."

Having tossed and turned most of the night, Harry was exhausted by the time he Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts. Hermione had promised to write, and Ron would be a quick owl away, so he knew he wouldn't feel too far from his friends. McGonagall was waiting for him just inside the gates. She showed him to his rooms, which were reasonably sized and tastefully, if sparsely, furnished.

As he explored his quarters, running his fingers over everything in reach, he felt much of the tension inside him drain away. It felt indescribably good to have something of his own, something that he had chosen. To be alone by choice, and to be glad about it, was a new experience for him. Hogwarts was the only place that had ever felt like home. To be here now, a part of rebuilding her for a new and better world, meant quite a lot to him. Making a mental note to thank McGonagall for her instinct the next time he saw her, he enlarged his trunk to the correct size and made himself at home.

The work was slow but satisfying. Harry's first few weeks at Hogwarts were spent developing a routine, which consisted of regular meals, manual labour, and long walks on the grounds. He even felt some excitement about teaching and had already begun to put together a curriculum for each of his classes.

When Harry arrived in the Great Hall for dinner one evening in early June to find Draco Malfoy seated at the staff table, his mind went completely blank, and he halted where he stood, staring. Malfoy was just sitting there, picking at whatever was on his plate, as if it was completely normal and he hadn't just completely stunned Harry.

Harry stood gaping at his former nemesis; he hadn't even thought of the man since he'd seen him with his family that night in the Great Hall. To see him now felt more than strange...out of place at best. He had found a rhythm and didn't need or want anything upsetting it. Frowning, he made his way to his seat, staring at Malfoy all the while.

Malfoy looked up as Harry pulled his chair out, and if the other man was surprised to see him, he didn't show it. "What are you doing here?" Harry asked without preamble.

He received a sneer in return. "Not that it's any of your business, but..."

"Mr. Malfoy is here to help with the repairs, and he's also our new Potions professor," interrupted McGonagall as she pulled out her own chair. Harry hadn't noticed her enter. "I'm sure you recall his talent for the subject."

Harry snorted, and Malfoy glared coldly at him. "Benefiting from favouritism doesn't count as talent."

Malfoy opened his mouth, no doubt to shout something at Harry, but McGonagall cut him off with a few cold words to Harry. "I'm sure you are not implying that I would hire teachers who are less than qualified, Potter."

Harry flushed and shook his head, mumbling, "Of course not."

"Good. Now, I'm aware of the... rivalry the two of you have shared, but there will be none of that now. We are trying to rebuild what has been broken, and I can think of nothing more divisive than our students witnessing two of their professors feuding. Any ill will you have toward each other must be kept private. If I hear of it, both of you will be put on probation and possibly dismissed. Is that clear?"

Harry nodded, shame-faced, and he saw Malfoy grumble something affirmative as well. McGonagall gave a satisfied nod and took her seat, Malfoy went back to ignoring Harry in favour of his meal, and Harry was left to his thoughts. Truthfully, Harry couldn't say he held much ill will towards Malfoy. Sure, the man was an unpleasant git, but Harry didn't hate him. Maybe it was the events of the past year, everything they'd been through, together and apart, but if Harry dug deep within himself, the animosity just wasn't there. He had no idea how or why Malfoy had ended up here, but he supposed it didn't matter. McGonagall was right; there'd been enough pain and hate. Harry took a deep breath and said, "I have something for you, Malfoy."

The blond looked up, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

"It's in my rooms. Can you come with me when we're done here?"

Malfoy studied him for a moment, probably pondering what Harry might be planning to do to him, and Harry kept his expression as blank as possible. Finally, Malfoy nodded and said, "Make it quick. I don't have all night."

Harry rolled his eyes, but chose not to comment, and they both went on eating silently. Harry waited until Malfoy pushed back his chair and stood, then followed him out the doors. Harry sped up until he was walking ahead of the other man and said, "It's just this way." He led Malfoy back to his rooms, unwarding the door and pushing it open when they arrived. Malfoy followed him in slowly, and Harry noticed he stayed as close to the door as he could. "Wait here," he muttered as he entered his bedroom. He crossed to his trunk, which was sitting open on the floor under the window, and began to dig until he found what he was looking for.

Malfoy was right where he'd left him, and Harry held out the wand in his hand without further ado. "Here, this is yours."

Malfoy's eyes went wide as he stared, his eyes darting back and forth between Harry's eyes and hand.

"Take it," Harry said. "It's yours, and I don't need it anymore."

"I don't need it either," Malfoy said, regaining some of his usual aloofness. "I've purchased another one." Harry had read earlier this week that Ollivander had reopened his shop, so that didn't surprise him.

Harry shrugged. "Still, it belongs to you. It wouldn't be right for me to keep it. I've got my own wand as well." Harry had been using his holly and phoenix feather wand since he'd used the Elder Wand to repair it, and it had been working perfectly. Here," he said again, reaching the wand towards Malfoy. "You don't have to use it, but..." Harry shrugged again and sighed in relief when Malfoy slowly took the wand from him, staring at it as if it was a long-lost friend, which Harry supposed it was in a way.

Malfoy brought the wand to his chest, and Harry could see his fingers turning white as he grasped it. He seemed to collect himself, and Harry couldn't help smiling. Malfoy gave him a long look, then finally nodded and backed up the few steps it took to get to the door, which was still cracked open. Harry followed him out, then watched in surprise as he crossed the corridor and unwarded another door, which Harry realised must be his own quarters. "Malfoy," he called as the other man pushed open the door. "Tell your mother thank you for me."

Malfoy gave him a confused look, but nodded and closed the door behind him. Harry watched for a moment, replaying the exchange in his mind, then shut his own door softly.

The summer went by quickly in a flurry of work, newspaper articles that Harry was for once glad to read, owls to his friends, long lunches with Hagrid, and visits to Teddy. He heard from Ron often. According to Ron, George was subdued, but still better than anyone had expected, considering. The shop was still thriving, and Harry was glad about that.

Molly and Arthur kept Harry up to date on the goings on at the Ministry, which was undergoing a massive house-cleaning. Harry's only regret hearing this was that he wasn't there to toss the rubbish out himself. Still, he was honestly content with the progress of the repairs, feeling like he was doing his part.

Hermione had located her parents, had given them their memories back, and apparently they had all decided to finish out the year in Australia. Harry had worried that Hermione would jump back into everything as soon as the dust from the battle had settled, so he was pleased that she was taking a break. She needed it, if anyone did.

His visits with Hagrid were nice, as they gave Harry the chance to talk and think about nothing, but enjoy familiarity and companionship. Hagrid had proclaimed (loudly and with tears) how much it meant to him that Harry was alive and at Hogwarts, and this always made Harry smile. He was happy to have a friend so close by. Teddy was growing so quickly. Harry made the trip to Andromeda's house several times a week. Sometimes he just sat with Teddy and watched him gurgle and bat at the toys hanging over his crib, talking to the boy and telling him stories. Other times, he sat with Andromeda and reminisced about everything and everyone they had in common. He found that the more they did this, the less painful his memories became, and the more he was able to feel peace about the good parts.

He had owed Ginny like he'd promised he would. She had asked to come visit him several times, but he'd told her he would rather she didn't. This hadn't gone over very well, but Harry found that life was pleasant right now, and every conversation he'd had with Ginny lately had turned out to be unpleasant. Each of her owls had shown her increasing irritation, but Harry did not dignify her accusations. He was making so much progress with the castle and with his own life. He just wasn't ready to throw a relationship into the mix yet. He didn't know how to tell her this, and in his replies to her, he'd simply said he was distracted with his work and that it wouldn't be fair to see her when he couldn't give her his full attention. This was mostly true. He couldn't quite explain why the thought of picking up where they had left off made him so uncomfortable, but he was going with his gut instinct now, and it was telling him to maintain things as they were.

Life with Malfoy around had been surprising since that first night. Far from the bitter enmity that they had shared for so long, they now exchanged cordial words and the occasional sarcastic quip at meals and during their work together. Harry wouldn't have called them friends, but he thought the word 'truce' applied to the state of their relationship. Malfoy had a snappy sense of humour, the kind that Harry appreciated, when he wasn't using it to belittle the less fortunate. Rather than dreading bumping into the blond, he found he was never unhappy to see him. As the summer progressed, Harry became more and more curious about the fate of Malfoy's parents. There had been nothing about them in the *Prophet*, that Harry had seen, and he hoped that Narcissa, at least, had come out of everything okay.

He hadn't yet asked Malfoy about it, as he didn't want to upset the ceasefire between them. Already Malfoy responded to Harry's barbs in a different way than he had during their school years, so Harry was sure an opportunity would arise eventually.

Just after Harry's birthday, which had consisted of a nice cake at dinner and various gadgets from his friends, Harry decided he would make a trip to Diagon Alley to take a look at the items he might need for the school year. He mentioned this at dinner to McGonagall and, consequently, to Malfoy.

McGonagall nodded approvingly, and Malfoy said, "I need to go myself. How's tomorrow morning at nine for you, Potter?"

Harry blinked, and that was that.

It felt odd to be in Malfoy's company in such a normal setting as shopping. Not that he was unhappy about it, but it was definitely strange. In a way it was nice because Harry wasn't the only one stared at everywhere they went. Splitting the attention two ways was not something he was going to complain about. They split up a few times, like when Malfoy needed potions ingredients and Harry wanted ice cream, but most of the time, they walked side by side, exchanging small talk and friendly banter.

"Are you hungry yet?" Harry said around two, looking longingly at a café across the cobblestone street.

Malfoy nodded, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he pointed to the café and led Malfoy through the crowd. It was quieter once they were inside the doors, and Harry let Malfoy choose their table. Once they were seated, two parchments appeared in front of them, and Harry grabbed his, hungry enough that he tapped the first thing that sounded good with his wand, and his menu disappeared.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow at him, then continued browsing his own menu at a leisurely pace. Harry's stomach sank as he realized that this was probably the sort of establishment that would wait to deliver Harry's food until Malfoy's was ready as well. He almost made a comment about Malfoy taking so long, but stopped himself just in time as he realised that Malfoy would probably take longer just to spite him. Luckily, it was only a matter of a minute or so before Malfoy tapped his own menu, and only a few minutes after that, their food appeared in front of them. Harry dug right in with gusto, and he was halfway through his chicken steak before he noticed eyes on him and looked up to find Malfoy gawking at him in disgust. "What?" Harry said, blushing. "I was hungry..."

"So was I," Malfoy replied, looking down at his own food with distaste.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. I was just eating fast. I know it's bad manners, but it's not like I was slurping or smearing food on my face."

Malfoy gave a long-suffering sigh, but Harry figured he couldn't have ruined the man's appetite completely since he began eating (at a normal pace).

"What is that, anyway?" Harry asked, pointing his fork at Malfoy's plate.

"Lamb."

"Right... Uh, so where do you want to go from here?"

After swallowing and wiping his mouth gracefully, as if to prove a point, Malfoy replied, "Bookstore, I suppose. Do you know which textbooks you're going to assign?"

"Not yet. I was just going to go in there and see what's available."

"Great plan, Potter. What if they don't have anything suitable?"

Harry shrugged and chose not to respond to Malfoy's tone. "I'm sure they'll have a catalogue I can look at or something. What about you?"

"I've already ordered my copies. I'll just be picking them up." His tone was smug, as if he was proud that he'd thought ahead when Harry hadn't, and Harry found it oddly comforting that not all of the competition between them had died. "You'll probably want to get on that, Potter. McGonagall told me that the Hogwarts letters are going out next week. What if you decide to assign a book that they don't have in stock? They'll need time to order it in before the students show up asking for it."

Right. Harry hadn't thought of that. He tried not to let his slight embarrassment show, but it must have anyway, judging by the smirk on Malfoy's face. Harry scowled at him, and Malfoy let out a genuine laugh that surprised Harry and wiped away any irritation he felt. He found himself smiling as well, and for several minutes, the meal went on in peace. It was as he was scooping up his remaining mashed potatoes that it occurred to him to ask Malfoy about his parents. He weighed the idea for several minutes, not sure how Malfoy would take it, but in the end, he chose his words carefully and cleared his throat. "Malfoy, did you give my message to your mother?"

Malfoy's expression shuttered, and Harry was afraid he'd made a mistake, but he maintained his open expression. After a long silence during which Malfoy gave him measuring look, the blond replied, "I did. She said she didn't do it for you."

"Oh." Well, Harry had known that, but he appreciated what she had done all the same. "I know, but... she saved my life. Is she okay? They aren't going to arrest her or anything, are they?" The last part was said in a rush. The mistrust was evident in Malfoy's expression, and he wanted to assure him he was sincere.

"Why do you care, Potter? I find it hard to believe that you are suddenly concerned about the welfare of my family."

"It's not sudden..." Here Malfoy snorted. "No, listen. I saw some things. She only wanted to protect you. Through the whole war, even before..." He was thinking of what he'd seen in Snape's memory. He didn't want to go into all that, but he wanted Malfoy to know he truly cared. "I just... I don't want to see her punished for trying to protect her son." He didn't know how else to say it.

At last, Malfoy nodded, and most of the tension in Harry's body lifted. "She's fine. She and my father both. They are under house arrest for now while things are being changed around at the Ministry. Given that her crimes were insignificant compared to many others' and were committed out of necessity, we think she will be let off house arrest quickly."

"Good," Harry said, choosing not to comment on the issue of Lucius and the fact that Malfoy had not offered any further information. Harry considered the topic closed and was glad to have gotten through the conversation in one piece.

When they were finished and had paid the bill, they walked the short distance to Flourish and Blotts in companionable silence. Harry ended up selecting books for each year that were already in stock, all except for one. He asked the clerk to order enough copies of Advanced Defence in Practice by Gomery Trapp to supply his seventh-year students.

They made a quick stop in Madam Malkin's where they both picked up several sets of plain black teaching robes. Harry was finished first, being the less picky of the two. He'd been content to let an assistant fit him. While he waited, he stood off to the side, watching passers-by out the window as Malfoy snapped and fussed at Madam Malkin until he was satisfied. From there, Malfoy insisted that they visit Magical Menagerie, proclaiming that he needed a new owl, as his old one was currently being used by his parents. Harry swallowed a lump in his throat as he thought of Hedwig. He was most reluctant to go inside with Malfoy, not wanting to be reminded of his friend, but in the end, he didn't really fancy standing like a statue to be gaped at on the street corner. He followed Malfoy in and stood right inside the door as his companion wandered around browsing the owl selection.

"Can I help you, si...Harry Potter!" gasped the store clerk.

Harry flushed pink and looked longingly at the door. He shook his head. "I'm just waiting for... my friend." He indicated Malfoy, who was at the moment closely inspecting a medium-sized, grey barn owl with big black eyes.

The store clerk continued staring at Harry until Malfoy called, "I'll take this one."

His voice seemed to snap the clerk out of whatever trance he was in. "Of course, of course," he muttered, shuffling over to grab the chosen owl's cage and carrying it to the counter. "That'll just be fifteen Galleons, of course. She's a beauty, isn't she?"

Malfoy produced the gold, not deigning to respond the clerk's last comment, and left the store, Harry quickly in tow. As soon as they were back on the street, Malfoy held the cage up in front of his face and spoke to his new owl. "I'd rather not carry you about, you know. Fly to the Owlery at Hogwarts, and I'll visit you and give you a name when I get back."

The owl blinked once, and Malfoy opened the door to his cage. They watched as she took flight and became smaller and smaller in the distance until Malfoy shrank the cage and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Now where to?" asked Harry warily. The truth was he was getting tired and didn't know how much shopping he had left in him. A long, hot swim in the staff bathtub sounded quite nice to him and to his aching feet.

"Now, Potter, you are free to go, but I'm going to Quality Quidditch," Malfoy said with a smirk.

Harry perked up immediately. It had been ages since he'd even thought about Quidditch, and he realized suddenly how much he'd missed it. The two of them hurried to the shop, Malfoy elbowing Harry out of his way to get in the doorway and Harry shoving back with a grin. The place looked much the same as it always had, just with newer, more expensive brands of everything. They wandered around separately, browsing almost the entire stock of the store, until Harry heard Malfoy gasp and hurried over to see what the fuss was about. Malfoy virtually had his face pressed up against the glass of a display case, which held the most amazing thing Harry had ever seen. It was called the Streamblazer, and Harry wanted it. It was a sleek, almost metallic blue with silver bands circling the handle and bristles. Harry's eyes greedily took in the stats of the broom, from the speed to the various charms placed on it, until Malfoy abruptly marched over to the sales desk and announced. "I'll take one."

Harry's jaw dropped as the man behind the desk looked blankly at Malfoy and said, "One what."

Malfoy scowled. "A Streamblazer."

"Oh!" the man gasped. "Of course!"

"Send it to Hogwarts, care of Draco Malfoy, and bill my Gringotts vault."

"Right away, Mr. Malfoy. I'll take care of that immediately. Right away." Harry could see the man's fist shaking as he handed Malfoy a quill and a parchment to sign and

knew he must be working on commission. Malfoy finished his signature with a long, swirling motion and turned to Harry, a triumphant grin on his face.

"Ha, Potter! Now you'll never outfly me again!"

Harry narrowed his eyes and grinned. "Is that a challenge?"

"Could be. Think you can handle it?"

Taking a deep breath and choosing not to think about what he was about to do, Harry said, "I'll take one, too."

Both Malfoy's and the salesman's eyes widened comically. Harry realised Malfoy hadn't expected him to rise to his bait, and actually, Harry was rather worried about the poor salesman, who looked like he was about to faint.

"We'll see about that, Malfoy."

Malfoy smirked at him again, and Harry turned and looked expectantly at the man behind the counter. Voice shaking, the man said, "Uh, right. That'll be..."

"*Don't* tell me how much it is."

The man nodded quickly and said, "I'll, er, bill your Gringotts vault as well then."

"You do that."

They left the store quickly, Harry in a daze. When they reached the corner, he began to laugh hysterically. "I can't believe I just did that!"

"I can't either," Malfoy said, shaking his head.

"That probably cost... I don't even want to think about how much that cost. Probably enough to buy a new house or something."

"If I recall correctly, you inherited the Black family vaults from your godfather, so it will hardly make a dent, Potter."

Well, that was true enough, but still. Harry couldn't believe he'd been so impulsive. But it had certainly felt good. Both to accept Malfoy's challenge and to buy something he had wanted so much. He couldn't help laughing again, and apparently it was contagious, as Malfoy joined him.

The *Prophet* the next day surprised Harry, though he figured he should have expected it. It was a front-page article that flashed various shots of himself and Malfoy throughout their day. The last one showed them leaning on each other for support as they laughed and laughed. Harry sat in his seat in the Great Hall and smiled. He hadn't laughed like that in a long time. Malfoy looked... happy, too. In the time they'd both been working at Hogwarts, he had seen a few genuine smiles from the blond, but not many. Yesterday had been the first time he'd seen Malfoy laugh like that, and he hoped it wouldn't be the last.

The article speculated about why they had been together and about what it meant. Were they friends? More than friends? That thought made Harry blush as a memory of Malfoy looking up at him over lunch through his lashes flashed into his mind. He quickly read on and was actually relieved when he got to the end and there hadn't been any vicious accusations or lies. Either the *Prophet's* staff was losing their touch, or they had decided it was pointless to make things up about Harry's life. He hoped it was the latter.

He looked over at Malfoy, who was reading the article himself, and blushed again, looking away quickly.

The day was spent as it usually was...they were now down to basic things like polishing the stones in the dungeons. At lunch, Harry and Malfoy both looked up as two large owls carrying identical, broom-shaped packages flew into the Hall and dropped their parcels onto the table. They wasted no time in tearing the wrapping from their new brooms and held them up proudly.

"My, my," McGonagall muttered. "You boys were busy yesterday, hmm?"

Harry just smiled at her, then raised an eyebrow at Malfoy, who seemed to get the message, as he jumped from his seat and took off at a run. Harry ran after him, and before he knew it, he was out the doors to the castle and chasing Malfoy through the air, faster than he'd ever gone. He couldn't remember ever feeling so light and free; it was pure joy. For hours, they circled and chased and dove and charged at each other. Harry had the time of his life. They didn't even slow down until the sun began to set. When it was almost dark, Harry landed on lawn in front of the castle, Malfoy right behind him. Breathing hard, they strolled back inside, finally stopping to rest when the doors were closed behind them. Harry turned to look at Malfoy and felt a jolt sweep through his stomach. His blond hair was everywhere, giving new meaning to the term 'windswept.' His eyes were shining, and he was smiling another genuine smile. Harry's heart began to beat a bit faster.

He swallowed, unsure of why he was suddenly feeling so frazzled, but it had been so... exciting. Harry couldn't wait to do it again.

"See, Potter," Malfoy panted. "Told you I'd outfly you."

Harry gasped in mock outrage and shoved at the blond. "I was ahead of you almost the whole time!"

"Keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel better." He shoved back, gently, and Harry's stomach did that flipping thing again. He turned quickly and started towards the Great Hall, hoping there was still some food left from dinner. "Last one to the Hall is a purple Kneazle!" he called and took off.

There was indeed a bit of food left, and Harry slept wonderfully that night.

His good mood was deflated at breakfast the next morning when the owl he recognized as Ginny's arrived. Her letter berated him for going shopping and not asking her to join him. She demanded to know why Malfoy had been with him and since when they had been on good enough terms to go *anywhere* together. She railed about how Harry was still leaving her out of his life. By the end of it, Harry's jaw was clenched, and even Malfoy noticed something was amiss.

Harry looked up at him, and Malfoy quirked an eyebrow. Not wanting to explain or even think about it right then, he said, "Want to go flying again today?"

Malfoy did.

Harry eventually replied to Ginny, telling her he had just needed to get a few things and that there would have been no point in asking her to come. He said as little as possible about Malfoy...it was none of her business after all...and he ended his letter by telling her flat out that he didn't appreciate how pushy she was being. He had already told her that he wasn't ready to be with her again, hadn't he? Why was she making demands and implying that Harry had no right to do anything on his own or with anyone else if she wasn't there?

Her reply was rather cold, and interestingly enough, Harry found he wasn't bothered by it.

The next few weeks were filled with many such flights as the first and eventually real conversations. It turned out that Malfoy had approached McGonagall and had asked her what he could do to help. Originally, he had only been thinking about helping with the repairs, but when McGonagall had offered him a job teaching, he had leapt at the chance. Harry asked him why he hadn't seemed to be surprised to see him, and Malfoy replied that he had been forewarned. Somewhere along the way...Harry wasn't sure when...they had stopped calling each other Malfoy and Potter and had switched to their given names instead, at least some of the time. The day Harry realised this, his stomach gave another lurch, which he was beginning to get used to. They frequently borrowed books from each other, and as the summer drew to a close, Harry often spent his evenings sitting on Draco's sofa, talking, laughing, and occasionally drinking. Draco had also been helping Harry plan some of his lessons, for which Harry was grateful. He could have done it on his own, he knew, but he was glad to have someone else's input, just to make sure he wasn't going to bollocks everything up totally.

The night before the start of the term, Draco was sprawled out on Harry's sofa, sipping a butterbeer. He was leaning back against the large cushy arm, and his eyes were closed as he went on about something or another. Harry hadn't been paying attention for a while now. Rather, he was watching the blond from his own chair, his mind totally blank as his eyes followed the movement of Draco's lips.

"... what I mean? Harry?"

Harry jolted upright and said, "Er... yeah."

"You haven't been listening to a word I've said, have you?"

"I have."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Right. What was I saying?"

Well, no, he supposed he hadn't actually heard much. "Something about... charms?"

"Not even close."

Harry shrugged and grinned. "Not my fault you're so boring."

"Boring! I'll show you boring..."

Harry only had time to notice a sock being removed from Draco's foot before it hit him in the face. It took him a moment to recover from his shock, but once he had... "All right, Malfoy. This means war."

More socks were hurled, followed by cushions and the knit cap Harry had been wearing. When Malfoy still had the audacity to smirk evilly at him, Harry resorted to physical violence. He tackled the blond forcefully, and they landed in a heap on the sofa.

"Oof," Draco grunted. "Get off me, you fiend!"

"Never!"

Malfoy gave as good as he got, and the two of them wrestled about for several minutes, taking turns pinning each other, until Malfoy froze. It took Harry a moment realise he was the only one moving. "What?" he asked, stilling, his voice hoarse. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?" Draco just stared at him, eyes wide, breathing as hard as Harry. Harry was beginning to worry. He released his grip and lifted himself off the other man... and then hissed when his crotch brushed against Malfoy's leg, pleasure shooting through him. It was Harry's turn to freeze. Mortification washed through him as he realised that he was completely hard.

"Oh, God," he gasped, getting as far away from the blond as fast as he could. "I'm sorry! God... I'm..."

He stared at the floor, unwilling to meet Draco's eyes, afraid of what he'd find. He didn't know what the other man was thinking, but the last thing he wanted was for them to go back to how things had been before. He had to make Malfoy understand that he hadn't meant for that to happen. That he didn't... "I'm sorry," he said again, working up the courage to meet those grey eyes. Malfoy was just staring at him, an unreadable emotion on his face. Harry panicked. "Draco, please, it was a mistake! I didn't mean..."

Draco's raw expression closed off as he sneered at Harry. "Of course you didn't," he spat as he headed for the door.

"Wait!"

"What, Potter?" his friend growled. "Wait around so you can pretend...forget it."

"But I didn't mean for that to happen! I don't know why..."

"That's the fucking problem! Good night, Potter," he snarled and slammed Harry's door shut behind him. Harry collapsed in his chair, his eyes closed tightly. He was sure he'd just made a terrible mistake, but he had no idea what it was. Or how to fix it.

Harry barely slept that night and woke up exhausted and miserable. Only now that he was in danger of losing it did he realize how much he had grown to value his friendship with Draco. This summer had been the best he could remember. If everything was ruined just because of Harry's traitorous body... It didn't even bear thinking about. He just *had* to mend whatever damage he'd done. He was sure that Draco thought he was a disgusting pervert, but he just had to convince him it had been an accident and that he hadn't meant it like that. It had just been because they were wrestling, and the contact...

Without even bothering to shower, Harry threw on his clothes and hurried across the hall, banging on Draco's door. "Draco? Are you in there?" he called. "Please, open up, I need to talk to you!" He pounded for several minutes and was beginning to think that maybe Draco had already gone to breakfast. He had turned and was intending to head to the Great Hall when the door swung open to reveal Malfoy glowering at him, wearing just his sleeping shorts, his hair ruffled and his eyes puffy from sleep.

Harry was speechless, all the things he had been planning to say escaping him completely. His eyes raked up and down that long, pale body, and he swallowed so hard he almost choked. "Draco..."

"What the fuck, Potter. It's six in the morning. Go back to sleep."

"I, uh..." Harry shook his head to clear it and forced himself to look Draco in the eye. "I really need to talk to you."

"Talk to me later then. I'm going back to..."

"Please?" Harry almost whispered.

Malfoy let out a long sigh, but Harry could see his expression soften a bit. "If this is about last night..."

"I just want to explain..."

"Don't worry about it."

"I didn't... oh. But I..."

"Just forget it. I understand. It was an accident. Now can I go back to sleep?"

"Oh, yeah... I guess. If you're sure."

"I'm sure. It's fine." He gave Harry a half-hearted smile and closed the door, muttering, "Later."

Harry couldn't help but think that it was far from fine. But... at least if Draco was speaking to him, he'd have a chance to make it up to him. He resolved to do just that and then headed for a shower.

He'd been right. It wasn't fine. He hadn't been able to find Draco anywhere all day, not in his rooms nor any of their usual spots, and when the blond had shown up for the Welcome Feast, it was fashionably late. He didn't so much as look at Harry, and Harry spent so much of the meal trying to get his attention and trying to think of what he wanted to say that he barely noticed the Sorting or his name being called as McGonagall introduced him to the students. When the plates had been vanished and McGonagall was making her speech, Harry finally succeeded in commanding Draco's attention by elbowing him in the ribs...harder than he'd meant to. The glare he received in return made his stomach sting. He forgot immediately what he'd been planning to say for a moment.

He had gathered himself again by the time everyone was dismissed, and he followed Malfoy quickly out of the Hall as the blond walked at a fast pace back to his rooms. Harry struggled to keep up with him, trying to maintain something between a skip and a jog. "Draco, will you wait?"

Draco stopped immediately and raised his eyebrows at Harry expectantly. It took Harry a moment to catch his breath. "Look, you said it was fine. I know it's not, but I don't know what you want me to say. I don't want us to go back to hating each other. Please, just tell me what you want from me."

Malfoy let out a bark of a laugh that startled Harry. "Potter, trust me, that's the last thing you want to know."

More confused than ever, Harry muttered, "I don't understand."

"That's the problem." Malfoy sighed and seemed to deflate right in front of Harry's eyes. "Look, really, it's fine. I'm obviously barking up the wrong tree."

Harry shook his head, his mind shouting, *What does that even mean?* "So... we're still friends?" Harry held his breath.

Draco rolled his eyes, but smiled one of those smiles that always made Harry feel like everything was okay. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

Harry felt his whole body relax, and he smiled back. "Good," he said, pushing at Draco's shoulder gently.

The blond's body tensed, but it was fleeting, and soon they were walking at their usual pace together, Malfoy telling Harry about a letter he'd received from one of his friends. It felt like everything was back to normal again. Mostly.

The first day of classes was fairly nerve-wracking, both before and during. It wasn't until the last group had left his classroom and he realised that he had survived that he felt himself relax. It really hadn't been too bad. Once the students, the younger ones at least, stopped staring at him in awe (and they had to eventually, right?), it would actually be fairly pleasant. The high point of the day had been when one of his third-years, a clumsy boy who reminded him of Neville, had executed a perfect Ticking Charm on the first try. The child had beamed at Harry, and Harry had known then that he'd made the right decision.

The low point had been his seventh-year class after lunch, which Ginny had spent shooting him scathing looks. He had been completely shocked when she'd walked in. It hadn't even occurred to him that she would be here. He had recovered quickly and had mostly ignored her, reasoning that it would be inappropriate to acknowledge her above any of the other students. The hurt look she had given him halfway through the lesson had left him with a pang of guilt, but he'd still chosen not to acknowledge her glares.

After class, the only thing that had saved him from getting an earful, he was sure, was the fact that Luna had approached his desk and engaged him in a conversation about new type of Snorkack she'd discovered over the summer. Harry had nodded and smiled, though he hadn't heard a word she'd said. It really had been nice to see her, and after a few minutes of waiting by the door, Ginny had given up and stomped out. He hadn't gone after her.

He spent the evening, the time between classes and dinner, in Draco's rooms. They traded stories from their days and sipped some weak Firewhiskey, which Harry had brought with him.

"This shite is terrible, Potter," Draco said with a laugh, grimacing at the taste of the stuff. "Where did you get this?"

Harry shrugged. He didn't actually remember. Maybe one of the Weasley twins. "You don't have to drink it."

"I'm aware of that." He watched as Draco pushed his glass away and then listened as the blond went on about an explosion in his fourth-year class. Apparently one of the Gryffindors had seen fit to cast a Vanishing Spell on his failed potion before his teacher could get a look at it and had wound up setting fire to the whole thing.

Harry laughed as Draco demonstrated the boy's wide-eyed look as Draco had swooped down on him in what he described as a very "Snape-like" manner. Before either of them realized how much time had passed, Harry's stomach grumbled loudly, and a glance at the clock told them they were late for dinner. They continued their conversation on the way there, barely even pausing as they were separated in the crowd of students leaving the Hall.

He barely noticed what he ate for dinner as they continued talking and laughing. When they were both finished, they left together and ended up heading to the Owlery, as they both had letters to post.

"Yeardley!" Draco called as they entered the large room. Harry rolled his eyes at Draco's choice of name... for the fiftieth time.

"Shut it. It's a good name."

"Yeah, for a cartoon character."

This earned him a glare, and Harry sniggered.

They ceased their chattering as they instructed their respective owls...Harry used a school owl...on where to take their post. The way back to their rooms was quite a long walk, but Harry didn't mind, and Draco didn't seem to either. Harry loved spending time with his friend like this. He loved that Draco seemed to barely breathe between rapid sentence after sentence when they were alone, that he knew most of what the other man was going to say before he said it, and that Draco knew just as much about him. They had come a long way in what Harry figured was probably a short period of time, but it felt like it should always have been this way, that they were making up for lost time.

It sometimes struck him as odd that they had ended up having so much in common, but when he really thought about it, it wasn't so odd. Even now, as Harry listened as best he could to what Draco was saying, the thought came to him that the thing he had least expected coming to Hogwarts had turned out to be the best. Harry smiled suddenly and brightly, and Draco's voice trailed off as he noticed.

"What are you grinning at?" he asked with a smile of his own.

"Nothing important," he said, shaking his head. "Go on." So Draco did.

When they arrived back at their rooms and stood in the corridor between their doors, Harry said, "So, how about flying tomorrow after classes?"

"All right, meet you out front?"

"How about on the pitch? No so many people around."

Draco nodded. "Good point. Right then, 'night."

Harry watched as the blond turned and began the process of opening his door. Still feeling the high of their laughter and the after-effects of Draco's smiles, his nerves surged almost painfully as Draco's hair swished to the side and revealed his pale neck. Something grabbed Harry in his gut, and he stopped breathing. He almost called out after him, or followed him...something...but he reminded himself that those were the kind of thoughts that got him into trouble, that had almost ruined everything. He stood, his heart pounding, until Draco turned around and gave him a lopsided smile as he waved once and closed his door. Harry felt like he'd just been hit by the Knight Bus and stood frozen, before finally wandering into his apartment in a haze of thrilled confusion. Once inside, he leaned back against the door and closed his eyes. All he could see was that smile... He was lost in it, in a swirl of racing thoughts, none of which made sense.

A knock on his door startled him back into reality. He swallowed, breathing hard, and shook his head in an attempt to clear it. Taking a deep breath, he pulled the door open to find Ginny standing there.

"We need to talk," she said, her mouth a thin line and her eyes cold.

Harry, still feeling a bit like he'd been tipped over, could only nod. She pushed his door open and marched herself inside. Harry closed the door softly and turned to face her, knowing that this was going to be bad and feeling even worse about it because he knew he could have handled it better, that it never should have gotten to this point.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" she began.

What indeed.

"I have no idea what your problem is. You ignore me for a year, and then just when I think, 'Oh, it's over, he'll have time for us now,' you still ignore me! For the whole summer, Harry!"

Harry's guilt deepened as he saw tears spill from her eyes. He knew most of her anger was a cover for the hurt she was feeling, and he honestly couldn't blame her, not for her hurt or her anger. "Ginny... I don't know that to say."

She gave a half-laugh, half-sob. "What is it, Harry? What's changed? I thought we were going to be together. You said we just couldn't be together while I was in danger, while you had other things you had focus on, and then we could! I thought you'd be happy to see me back in May and then again today... but you just... nothing."

Harry shook his head, his heart aching, and said helplessly, "I don't know. I... I never... I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I love you, Harry," she whispered pleadingly.

"I know you do, Gin." His voice was soft. "I love you, too, just..." And that was the problem. Somewhere along the line, something had changed without him realising it. He had stopped dreaming about what life would be like with her after the war was over and had started dreaming about just making it through. When he had made it through, his dreams of being with her had no longer existed. He just hadn't known it until now. Something had felt wrong for a while; her letters had given him an uncomfortable feeling that he now realised he should have recognized for what it was. Thinking about it, he didn't know what he could have or would have done differently, but that didn't change the fact that he was responsible for breaking the heart of someone he cared about. It wasn't a good feeling.

Ginny looked up at him miserably. "So you don't want me anymore. You don't want to be with me."

He cringed inwardly, wishing there was something he could do or say. "Not... like that."

Ginny seemed to crumble before him, though she remained upright, and Harry realised that she had been living for this, for them. Her own dreams were crumbling before her eyes, dreams Harry knew she'd had for many years. He wanted to hug her and hold her, but he wasn't sure if that would make it worse. He decided to anyway. He moved to her and enfolded her in his arms, stroking her hair as she cried and held him tightly. *It'll be all right*, he wanted to whisper, or... *You'll find someone else*, but he said nothing, not wanting to hurt her more than he already had. For a long while, he let her cry until her sobs quieted and she stilled but for her breathing. He manoeuvred her so that he could look into her eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I don't... I hope you know that I never meant to hurt you." The words felt empty, even to Harry, but he didn't know what else to say.

He felt her nod jerkily, and she pulled away from him, putting some distance between them. She wouldn't look him in the eye, and that made him feel worse, though he supposed he deserved it.

"I'd better go," she said, her voice rough, but flat.

Harry nodded, wishing he could make it easier for her but knowing there was nothing he could do. He followed her to the door and stood there as she opened it and slipped through. He leaned against the door frame, watching her go. "Harry," she said, turning around. "Can I... can I kiss you? Just one more time, just so I can remember what it feels like?"

Harry paused, but quickly nodded, thinking that maybe if it would help her... It was over, and they both knew it, so he could give her this. She came back to him and pressed her lips to his. He did her the courtesy of kissing her back, trying to say goodbye with his lips in a way she would understand. He pulled her to him and hugged her tightly one last time before releasing her and pulling his lips away from hers. He gave her the best smile he could, then watched as she walked away again, this time for good. He waited until she had turned the corner, then leaned back against his doorframe, feeling like he'd been turned inside out. It was the sound of breathing that made him open his eyes. He turned and found Draco glaring at him, a broken expression on his face. Harry's heart throbbed painfully, not understanding what was wrong but wanting to fix it, whatever was making Draco's eyes burn like that.

"Draco..." he said, crossing the corridor.

"Fuck you, Potter." It was choked, and the door was being slammed in his face. Harry stuck his arm out and stopped it before it closed, shoving his way inside and grabbing Draco by the arms. "What...tell me what I..." he stuttered as Draco tried to fight him off. He succeeded, yanking his arms from Harry's hold, and backed away like a caged animal, but Harry followed him all the way to the other side of the room and pinned him against the wall, confused and angry and not knowing why. He wanted to hit the man and scream at him and hold him and... and... "What's the matter with you?" he ground out. "Fuck *me*? What the... What did I..."

He was abruptly cut off as Draco pushed him hard. He stumbled backward and almost fell before Draco caught him and pushed him back up against the door. "What is this?" he growled. "What is this, Potter? Do you even know?"

Harry shook his head slowly, again and again, his eyes wide, and Malfoy pushed him harder and harder against the door, as if trying to drive him through it. Harry had never felt so many things at once. He reached out blindly with his words, trying to understand. "I don't know what you mean, I...this is us, Malfoy. It's just...it's always been us." He didn't know what he was saying. He didn't know what Malfoy was saying. He didn't know anything.

He pushed back against Draco, but the man held him firm against the door.

"Fucking right. Always. You think you can just...with her, and..."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he shouted.

"You can't!" Malfoy shouted back.

"Can't what?!"

"Touch her! Kiss her! Fuck her, love her! Not her, not anyone! You think it was a mistake? You don't even... You have no idea. No clue."

Harry was getting sick of these circles and Malfoy's nonsense. He wanted answers...now. "Tell me then," he ground out, "what you're so upset about."

"That night, the other night," Malfoy spat back, bruising Harry's shoulders with his grip. And suddenly Harry understood. Malfoy was still mad about that, even though Harry had explained, even though Malfoy had said it was fine. How long was he going to hang on to that? And why had he told Harry to forget about it if he hadn't forgotten about it himself? He was angrier than ever now, feeling like he couldn't keep up with Draco's games. "You told me it was fine. I told you it was an accident," he said through gritted teeth, blood rushing in his ears. "How many times do I have to tell you that before you'll forgive..."

"Don't you fucking say one more time that it was an accident, Potter. Never again."

And then his mouth was crushing Harry's so hard it hurt, and Harry couldn't breathe, couldn't think, and he'd never felt so alive.

Oh.

Oh.

And then it did make sense. He pushed Draco back as hard as he could, following him with his lips and tongue as he drove him into the sofa and covered the blond's body with his own. They were an almost violent blur of hands and fingernails, gasps and wild heartbeats.

Malfoy's nonsense wasn't nonsense anymore. It had always been them; he had only ever felt this... much for the man beneath him. At eleven years old, the feeling had gone by a different name, but as Harry poured everything he had into Draco and took just as much, he understood. Everything else had just been practice for this.

After Harry no longer felt the need to tear them both apart, he pulled back enough to rain kisses down on Draco chin, his neck, everywhere he could reach. Draco's fingers, which only moments before had left bruising marks on his skin, left different sorts of marks as they traced Harry's body gently. Harry was drowning, his mind and body a swirling riot of colour and emotion. He met Draco's mouth again, and it felt different this time, knowing what they were to each other. Everything fit now, the puzzle that he'd been trying to piece together for so long, or at least the important parts did. They would figure out the rest of it together.

For now, he was... happy.

End