

Must Go On

by darktidings

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on – Carl Sandburg

For months afterward, Harry's strongest memory of the hospital was the smell, a cloying array of cleaning fluid scents that brought back unpleasant memories of a childhood spent using the strongest disinfectants to satisfy his aunt's devotion to destroying even the tiniest germ that ventured into her territory. At least the hospital had good reason to stink of disinfectant.

The second strongest memory was the clock, which had an echoing ticking sound that overshadowed even the whispering of the exhausted elderly couple huddled in the uncomfortable surgery waiting room seats. It didn't matter where he sat in the room. The ticking followed him, each tick driving home his fear and grief.

Just when he thought he'd go completely mental from waiting, the door slowly opened, and a petite nurse in green scrubs glanced around the room. Dismissing the couple, she focused on him. "Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded.

"Come with me, please." She stepped aside to let him exit the waiting room ahead of her. "Dr. Foster is waiting to speak to you."

All hope he'd been holding onto fled as they rounded the corner and he saw the familiar kindly features of the obstetrician. Dr. Foster reached out and took one of Harry's hands, holding it between hers.

"I'm so sorry, Harry. We couldn't save her, and it was touch and go even getting the baby delivered. I know you're aware of the seriousness of the baby arriving at 25 weeks." She squeezed his hand gently. "But we've got one of the best neonatal units in the region. We'll be doing everything we can."

He simply felt numb. From experience, he knew the devastating grief was lurking, and it would overtake him probably when he least needed to crumble. It took three tries to find his voice. "Can I see the baby?"

She nodded, and keeping one of his hands in hers, she led him to the NICU, using the walk and elevator ride to quietly detail the devastating reality of having a micro-preemie baby. The part of him that had never quite stopped being a wizard began to wonder if the baby's odds were better if he returned to his own world.

Standing at the incubator, he touched the plastic that protected his newborn son from the world. So little of the baby could be seen, between the tubes and monitors and wrappings, and he ached to be able to hold the single remaining member of his family. He'd listened as carefully as he could as Dr. Foster turned him over to the

pediatrician, who began a recitation of facts beyond the overview he'd gotten on the trip over.

It had strengthened the idea that he needed to make a trip to the wizarding hospital to find out all the options for his son. He was glad he'd settled in an American city that had one. He slipped his hand into the glove of the incubator, moving his hand to let the baby's miniscule fingertips barely touch his smallest finger. Tiny eyelids fluttered.

His eyes met those of the nurse, who gave him an encouraging smile. "Talk to him, Mr. Potter. Even if you can't hold him yet, they often know their parents' voices anyway."

It took four tries for Harry to manage a simple "hello" to the baby. There was no reaction from the baby, but once started, he couldn't stop. The words poured forth, describing the family they'd lost today and how much he would do everything in his power to be the best father he knew how.

When the words finally ceased to come, he slowly slipped his hand out of the incubator and looked to the waiting nurse. "I need to go make start making arrangements," he said, hating that it sounded like he was doing something as simple as planning a move, not a funeral.

She nodded. "There's paperwork they need you to fill out, for the baby, and an emergency contact form. You've got a cell phone, right?"

"Yeah." He patted his pocket almost by instinct to make sure he had the gadget.

"Good. We'll call you the second you're needed." She came around the incubator to place a gentle hand on his arm. "Had you decided on a name?"

Harry took a shuddering breath, closing his eyes and seeing the baby names book and small spiral notebook that had been a near-permanent resident of the living room coffee table since the first positive pregnancy test. "No. But I think that Richard suits."

"A good name for a brave boy." She patted his arm and then moved to take the baby's chart to note the name.

His gaze went back to the baby, managing something that passed for a smile, before going to complete the paperwork the hospital needed so he could leave and make sure this brave, delicate baby got every possible chance – Muggle and wizarding both.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

Harry put the last of the shrunken boxes into his traveling bag and did one last walk through the house. Finding nothing aside from some remaining furniture the estate agent he'd hired was going to sell before turning the house over to the new owners, he lifted Richard into the sling on his chest. Shouldering the baby's bag and his own out of ease of habit gained in recent months, he pulled the international Portkey out of his pocket and activated it wandlessly.

The sensation was no more pleasant now than it had been the last time he'd used one, more than a decade ago. But it was the safest means of wizarding travel for the baby, and he wasn't crazy enough to try Muggle methods with an infant. At least he'd learned to land safely, although his knees protested a bit when his shoes contacted the ground. He glanced up at Hogwarts' gates and to the castle beyond and took a deep breath. For the first time since the week after the final battle, he was at the first place he'd called home.

The gates swung open to reveal the Headmaster waiting with far more patience than he'd have expected from the man.

"Do you intend to stand out there all day with my namesake or come inside?"

Harry chuckled. "Considering I'll likely not see the boy once we make it to the steps, maybe I shouldn't."

That earned him a smile from Severus. "True. Although you might make it as far as your quarters if you hurry. I told them you were arriving at dinner instead of now, to let you settle in before they overwhelm you two." He stepped through the gates and gently stroked the sleeping baby's cheek with one long, slender finger. "He's got more weight to him now than he used to."

"I don't think he'll ever have the chubby baby appearance people expect."

They began the walk across the castle grounds. "And his health?"

"Good. We've been remarkably lucky on almost all counts. It helped, getting the mediwitch transferred into the hospital as a Muggle nurse."

Severus nodded, giving Harry a moment to study the man's profile as they walked. His former Professor looked older than his years, more like he'd appear if he were Muggle instead of a wizard. Perhaps it was the grey streaking his hair that truly added to that impression, but he thought the man looked far happier than he had in his younger years.

"You've heard of the changes at Hogwarts over the years, of course, but it'll be different, seeing them face on," the Headmaster explained.

"Considering I'm teaching a subject that didn't quite exist back when I was a student, I'm prepared for surprises." Harry paused to scan the grounds. "I'm glad the gamekeeper's hut was rebuilt, even if Hagrid's not living there anymore. It wouldn't seem like Hogwarts without it and the annual pumpkin patch. Who's gamekeeper currently?"

"Widower named Foster. Hagrid's trained him quite well, although I don't think anyone will ever enter the Forbidden Forest as carefree as Hagrid does."

"How are you surviving the half Weasley staff these days?"

"If you'd asked me ten years ago if I'd be happy in a castle where my staff contained a half dozen Weasleys or their spouses, I'd have thought you'd gone quite mad. I should probably thank you, though, that you gave those infernal twins their startup money. Otherwise they might have taken up teaching, and then I'd have retired faster than Minerva did."

"And Arthur?" Even after all these years, it hurt to think of why Arthur had left his Ministry job, to take up teaching.

"He misses Molly." Severus' voice was tinged with sorrow. "But I think it's easier for him here, especially considering how much of his family lives here. Hogwarts doesn't quite hold the same memories as the Burrow does, even rebuilt."

Harry shivered. He'd grieved with the rest of the family when Molly had died in the Death Eater raid that had destroyed the Burrow. But now, after losing Jessie, he thought he understood better the sort of grief Arthur experienced. If it had hurt that badly, after only four years, he thought it a miracle that the Weasley patriarch had managed to remain functional beyond his grief.

His lack of verbal response prompted Severus to continue speaking. "He's quite looking forward to meeting his youngest grandson."

"So he said, when he talked to me on the telephone a few weeks ago. Said wizarding pictures might be better than Muggle but they were still just pictures."

"A sentiment you'll find echoed by most of your family and friends here."

"Including you, Severus?"

They'd reached the castle steps and the Headmaster nodded. "Even if you hadn't named me godfather and the child's middle name after me, you'd both be family to me, Harry." The black eyes were far warmer than they'd been in Harry's youth. That last, hellish year of the war had seen to breaking down the barriers between Harry and his mother's childhood best friend.

"Good. I was afraid you might have disowned me for being gone from home for so long."

"You needed the time away, and then you had a family to consider."

"Think the papers will be bothered I'm back in Britain?" Harry asked.

"It's possible. There's been nothing scandalous in the news lately, so your return might cause them to dig around and remember the rumors of why you left in the first place. But I think they'll be more sympathetic now. The new Minister isn't as tolerant of blatant attacks on families as past ones might have been."

Harry shrugged. "We'll worry about that when it happens, I suppose. Where are you housing us?"

"You recall that we moved all the students to towers now?" At the nod, the Headmaster continued, leading the way into a less familiar area of the castle for Harry. "There are three family quarters around each House tower instead of scattered around the castle. As Gryffindor's are all occupied, I've assigned you to the open quarters in Slytherin. I thought you might enjoy being near two of the professors nearest you in age."

"Draco and Millicent, yeah?"

"Correct. Hogwarts is not much like it was when I first started teaching and was the only professor under thirty. It's quite the change from sitting at a table full of middle-aged or elderly professors." Severus paused at a portrait of an elegantly dressed woman wearing robes suited to a prior century. She greeted the Headmaster with a nod, and Severus turned to Harry. "What password do you require?"

"Sopophorous."

The potion-ingredient answer, especially considering its source, made Severus chuckle. "It would confuse most trying to guess your password, to draw from potions, I suppose." The regal woman of the portrait repeated the word, and then the portrait swung inward.

Harry preceded Severus into the plainly furnished quarters, dropping the two bags to the floor near the sofa and looking around. It was obviously set up for him to either transfigure or replace the furniture to suit himself, with just the basics of sofa, table, and one comfortable chair in the living room area, and a surprisingly nice-sized kitchen with a four-person dining table.

"The house elves will change out anything you need replaced if you don't intend to change it yourself, Harry. I was uncertain what personal items of furniture you might bring with you from your old home, so my instructions were for them to just make sure you had the appropriate items to get started with right away and neutral colors until you instructed otherwise."

That earned Severus a smile from Harry. "I suppose that's better than everything in silver and green," he teased.

"Do not tempt me. My transfiguration skills might not be at Minerva's level, but I do control the house elves who can make any changes I make permanent." The dark eyes held a spark of amusement.

Harry pretended to be horrified at the thought. "You wouldn't subject your only godson to such a limited color scheme, surely."

After a moment, Severus smiled slightly. "Consider him your only bargaining point then." He reached out to caress the pale blonde hair on top of the baby's head. "It is unusual, seeing you with a blond child. I'm glad he has the Evans eyes. That is a legacy I shall enjoy see live on for wizarding generations."

"Would you like to hold him? He needs to wake up anyway. If he sleeps much longer, he'll really have his times off. I started adjusting his schedule last week, so he'd be better used to Scottish time than American," Harry explained, reaching into the sling to lift the child out. Richard yawned and shifted, awakened by the movement, blinking green eyes and looking around. At the sight of Severus, he gave a babyish grin, reaching out for the older wizard.

"I remain amazed at how well he retains a memory of me, with only a few visits," Severus noted as he took the baby into his arms with an ease that would surprise most who knew him.

"He's got a photo of you in his room." Harry shuffled in the baby's bag and drew out a small box and removed two bright green hearing aids. "He'll need these, now that he's awake." It took only a moment to get both in place on the baby's ears, and a muttered sticking charm followed. "He's taken to pulling them off and throwing them lately. They make little straps to hold them in place, but those irritate him more, and magic less."

"He does manage to hear somewhat with them?" Severus asked, smiling when the baby immediately turned at the sound of his deep voice.

"Enough to turn toward sounds, especially voices, since he's learned to associate the vibrations from someone speaking who is holding him to the sound. But the Muggle specialists and Healers both don't think he regains enough to learn to speak." Harry sighed softly. "I've been learning sign language, since it's not good for him to have no communication at all, and I think he's better at it than me."

"Of course he is. He's my godson, whereas you were always a bit slow to comprehend."

Harry couldn't help laughing at the fond tone the "insult" had been delivered in. "Thankfully I'm better at sign language than I was at academics in Hogwarts. I'm not fluent enough to carry on regular conversation with a fully deaf person yet, but enough so that I can teach Richard at least. I'd considered hiring a tutor, but it's nearly impossible to find a wizard or squib with the skillset needed to teach a profoundly deaf child."

Severus looked thoughtful as the baby patted his cheek before trying to nibble on the buttons of his robe. "Perhaps you should find a squib in need of employment and pay for them to train as his tutor. By the time he's exceeded what family can truly teach him, they should have completed their training."

"Now that's a great idea." Harry began to rummage in his own bag. He'd packed and shrunk almost everything but the baby's everyday bag with nappies, bottles, and a few toys and clothes, but thankfully had remembered to put a change of clothes in his own bag so he didn't immediately have to unpack everything.

"Muggle dress is perfectly fine for dinner, Harry. It's still summer, so the professors don't always wear full robes."

Harry shrugged. "I want to get back in the habit, even if I'm teaching your 'Cultural Studies' class." He grinned, slipping the forest green robes on over his plain black jeans and the grey t-shirt he'd worn for traveling. His were far less formal than Severus' robes, who had relaxed enough to work a bit of color into his clothing now, but still wore the same style clothing he had when Harry was a student. Harry's were the style worn by many of his generation, casualwear meant to be worn open over shirt and trousers. "I've a variety of Muggle clothing to wear when I'm teaching the Muggle Studies side of the class. But on the other hand, I need to show the Muggleborn and Muggle-raised students that there's more to wizarding clothing than just Hogwarts' uniform robes in Wizard Studies."

"So long as you don't begin to imitate Gilderoy Lockhart, I'll leave your clothing choices to you."

"Merlin forbid I turn into that sort of inane peacock."

Handing the baby back to Harry somewhat reluctantly, Severus nodded. "I will see you at dinner in the Great Hall in an hour. That should give you time to get settled in. During summer, the children all attend meals, if their parents wish to shuffle their entire horde through the castle. I imagine tonight everyone will be in attendance to welcome you and young Richard home."

"I'm looking forward to it." Harry gave the older wizard a smile in farewell, waiting until the portrait door clicked closed behind him to turn to his son, who was nibble-drooling on his small fist. "How about we start making this place look like ours, big guy?"

It earned him a wave of the slobbery fist and Harry smiled. The past nine months had been a constant swing between heaven and hell, but now they were back among family and no longer alone. It was good to be home.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

Harry hadn't finished unpacking by any stretch of the imagination, but he'd at least begun to alter the plain living quarters into something resembling his own personal tastes. He'd decided that the next time he moved, he'd remember to label the packing boxes before shrinking them. Right now, the pile of cubes he'd tipped out on the sofa was a bit of a treasure hunt of enlarging the box, rummaging about, and then sending the items to where he thought they'd go best. All things considered, it likely meant he'd have to rearrange a half dozen times before he was truly settled in.

At least he'd found one of the important boxes the box of family photos. The mantle above the fireplace was now graced with various photos from the first one he'd had of his parents to the last candid shot he'd had made with Jessie and Jamie before their deaths. He could look at that one finally without thinking he needed to remember how to breathe without his chest constricting painfully enough to make it feel impossible and was eternally grateful he'd used a wizarding camera.

Richard watched solemnly from his high chair, a half-eaten biscuit in one hand. Harry knew it was bad form to feed a baby sweets of any sort before dinner, but it was a well-deserved treat for the baby's patience during his father's haphazard unpacking. He'd had to transfigure one of the existing chairs into the baby's chair... he'd not yet found the box where he'd packed Richard's furniture. He'd have to find that by bedtime or transfigure something for a cot, he supposed.

He was halfway through sorting out one of the electronics boxes, glad that with Hermione's spell designs they'd function in Hogwarts once he'd set up his power panel out one of the windows. Another reason to be glad his quarters were in the lower levels of a tower with true windows and not charmed ones. As he pondered the advisability of unpacking this box when he hadn't yet found the furniture it belonged on, he heard a knock at the door and wondered who'd discovered not only that he'd arrived early, but where his quarters were. Only one way to figure that one out...

He opened the door to see a once-familiar blond standing outside, wearing clothes rather similar to Harry's own mixed Muggle and wizarding attire, although his robe was a deep blue rather than green. "Hello, Draco. How'd you manage to track me down already?" He motioned the other man inside.

"Severus met me on the way to his quarters and suggested I stop by to see if you needed any help."

"And you willingly agreed to help me unpack?" Harry asked, smiling. "Doesn't seem like the Draco I grew up with."

The blond shrugged. "The prat you grew up with went around blathering about blood purity and being stupid enough to want to be the Heir of Slytherin. You'll forgive me if I'd rather not be that Draco anymore."

"Thankfully growing up meant getting a bit smarter, yeah?" They'd at least settled their differences, that week before Harry had decided to leave Britain at the end of the war. In the years since, they'd not had a lot of contact, but Severus remained a constant source of news between them. Harry motioned to the pile of shrunken boxes on the sofa. "I should probably let the house-elves finish it, but it wouldn't seem much like my own place if I let them sort it out."

Draco laughed. "Not to mention what they'd do when they encountered your Muggle stuff. The last Cultural Studies professor had to ban the elves from doing anything other than dusting the classroom due to their bouts of confusion in what the stuff was."

A thump on the high chair's tray drew both their attention to the baby, who gave his best two-tooth grin now that he had both men's attention.

"Someone wants an introduction, I see." Harry crossed to his son to caress his baby-soft blond hair. "Draco, this is my son, Richard Severus."

Harry was mildly surprised when Draco came over to the baby and produced a hippogriff plushie from a pocket of his robes. He presented it to Richard, who instantly dropped the remains of the biscuit to take the offered toy.

"My daughter asked me to bring the toy. She's rather excited to hear there's a baby in our tower now." The soft smile Draco gave the baby reminded Harry that the Slytherin had had upheavals of his own in his personal life. He wasn't the cold and remote Malfoy Heir any more than Harry was the impetuous youth who'd feuded with him through six years at Hogwarts.

"How old is she now?"

"Just turned nine about two weeks ago."

"Seems a bit odd, trying to picture so many of my classmates with kids almost old enough for Hogwarts," Harry remarked.

The friendliness in the blond's expression cooled considerably and Harry wondered what he'd managed to say wrong, but before he could remark on it, Draco nodded.

"Not just almost. Severus has been rather horrified to realize he's got three Weasleys starting this year."

Feeling awkward but not wanting to offend further, Harry smiled hesitantly. "Three Weasley girls, no less, all starting with his own son. He's probably having nightmares."

Whatever had been wrong, that seemed to dispel the strange coolness from Draco's features. "He claims he is, but Andromeda only laughs and reminds him at least none of them were sired by either of the twins."

Harry pretended to shudder. The twins had managed to reproduce several impish near-replicas of themselves, at least as far as their love of pranks. Some of the stories Harry'd heard over the years had been enough to make him just a bit glad there'd been a large ocean between him and the newest generation of Weasley pranks. "Those will arrive soon enough. They've got six between them, after all."

"Don't remind me. I think Severus is glad he's retired from teaching, and I'm just glad I teach an elective. If I'm lucky they'll think Runes far too boring to darken my classroom door."

"Lucky you, teaching an elective." Harry laughed, and then remembered Draco had arrived to help him unpack. "If you want to start unshrinking boxes and levitating them to the correct room, that would be a big help."

Draco nodded and unshrunk a box with a wave of his wand. "Harry, you do realize that most people label their boxes when they pack, right?"

"I kept losing the markers."

The blond paused in unsealing the box to give him a mock glare. "Just how many of them are you going to unpack from various boxes?"

Harry laughed. "All of them, probably, considering Richard isn't old enough to pocket them."

That got him a shake of the head from Draco, who turned back to inspect the box's contents. "Baby things." He flicked his wand to direct the box toward the hallway. "I'll assume you want the baby in the unfurnished bedroom."

"Yeah. Good plan, so long as I find his actual furniture for bedtime." Harry peered into his own box, deciding he had various bathroom items and sent it to the bathroom wandlessly.

"Showoff." Draco had returned just in time to see Harry flick his hand at the box and it disappear.

"Like you couldn't manage the same now that you've seen the layout of the rooms."

"With my wand, yeah. Waving my hand, not unless you want to risk your stuff ending up in the Great Hall or similarly lost."

Absorbed in opening the next box, Harry shrugged. "Most of it's replaceable, at least."

Draco paused to look at the photos on the mantle. "Looks like you found one of the most important ones already."

Harry glanced over his shoulder and smiled. "Second box I unpacked. How's that for luck? Makes it feel like home with just those out."

"Family photos do have that effect." He reached out and picked up the photo of Harry, Jessie, and Jamie, studying the trio. They were all in Muggle attire, jeans and t-shirts, with Harry's jet-black hair a strong contrast to the honey-blonde of the brother and sister who flanked him. "Do you think Richard's hair will darken up to this shade?" he asked, almost absently.

After a moment, Harry answered, voice soft with emotion. "Merlin, I hope so."

Apologetic after his inadvertent reminder of Harry's loss, Draco replaced the photo and returned to the task of helping unpack. "Sorry. Sometimes my mouth engages before my brain. Not very Slytherin of me, I know."

"It's easier now, at least." Harry sent another box to its room and glanced at the blond. "Coming back to the wizarding world helps. I don't expect either of them to appear around the corner in this castle after all."

The other wizard nodded in understanding, then cast a Tempus charm. "It's nearly time for dinner. I can come back to help after, if you don't mind company later."

"If your daughter doesn't mind, I'd appreciate it."

"She'll think Christmas and her birthday both came at once if she gets to play with the baby while we finish up."

Sending the current box he was working on to the bedroom, Harry went to retrieve Richard from the high chair, where he had been content to gnaw on his new plushie. Casting a quick cleaning charm to clear the remains of the biscuit from chair, baby, and hippogriff, he gathered the baby up and settled him on his hip.

"Grab his bag, will you?" he asked Draco.

Passing the baby's bag to Harry, Draco gently touched one of the bright bits of green plastic nestled behind the baby's ears. "How well do these work?" he asked, unable to contain his curiosity any longer.

"Not as well as I'd like. But at least he has some hearing with them."

Grey eyes met green. "And none without?"

"As far as we can tell, no. Muggle and wizard tests both show profound, irreversible hearing loss. None of the spells or potions tried worked. There's a Muggle thing, a type of electronic implanted in his ears, but it's not well-accepted in the Muggle deaf community and it'll destroy what little hearing he has."

"Does it matter what the Muggle deaf folk think?"

"Yeah. If he's not a wizard, I don't want to alienate him unnecessarily. Plus, I keep hoping some spell or potion advancement will help, and part of me worries that if I opt for the implants, there won't be enough left for his hearing to be restored."

"Understandable." The blond dropped his hand from the baby's ear and turned toward the door. "If there's a way to turn those off, you might want to before we reach the Great Hall. I suspect there will be a lot of feminine shrieking in delight when they lay eyes on him."

Harry couldn't help the laughter that drew his son's gaze upward to him, Richard's expression curious over the stuffed toy. "You just might be right about that."

Draco's rich laugh joined Harry's, and he led the way to the door. Harry was a bit shocked to realize how comfortable he'd found the other man's company. It would be nice to do more than bury past enmity and perhaps manage a true friendship with his old rival.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

Draco's prediction about the noise level of the feminine shrieking sort anyway in the Great Hall was fairly accurate. Rather than adjust the hearing aids themselves (and risk the baby's irritation), Harry had cast a silencing spell variant to just keep noise to normal speaking levels for a small bubble around Richard. The trick had earned him a smirk from the blond wizard, who had swung open the doors to the Great Hall... and quickly stepped behind Harry and his son.

It proved to be a prudent idea, as the newcomers were enveloped almost immediately by both Hermione and Tonks, with various Weasley spouses hovering to exclaim happily over the baby's pale-colored hair. Giving in to the obvious wish of his oldest female friend to hold the baby, he passed Richard over and watched his son be absorbed into the gaggle of admiring women.

"We don't exist at the moment, do we?" he remarked to Draco, who moved to stand beside him as the women moved away.

"I suppose Hermione will remember you eventually, but the rest, probably not." The Slytherin shrugged. "Might as well join the men up at the table until this lot remembers we're here to eat."

Finding that a less daunting idea than staying amid the females engaged in spoiling his son utterly rotten, Harry followed him the rest of the way to the staff table, glancing around the Great Hall as he did. The ceiling had been repaired after the final battle and displayed the outdoor sky with all its former glorious enchantment. There were more tables than the four that had existed in Harry's time, and at his questioning look, Draco explained.

"First years sit together regardless of House. Severus figured they have plenty of time in their common rooms to form House ties. He's prone to rearranging seating if they clump up by House at that table too. Usually only has to do it once or twice before they get the idea." With a wave of his hand, Draco indicated the sixth student table. "Same idea, but opposite age group. Seventh years have the same rules. It cuts down on House rivalry, and it's better than abolishing Houses altogether."

Harry nodded. While some students, like Luna, had often sat with friends at other House tables, it hadn't been a common practice to mingle during meals.

"Summertime, most of the staff and family gather for dinner. Kids sit at the family table in both summer and during term," continued the explanation, and the blond wizard indicated a table in an alcove not in full view of the student tables. "During term, spouses usually sit there too, although summers it's not unusual to spill down onto the student tables. We're asked to take turns sitting at the staff table, at least four of us at each meal. There's a schedule, although you're likely exempt until Richard's a bit older."

The explanation ended there, as they'd reached the men gathered around the staff table, and Harry was immediately swept into the arms of his foster father. He returned Arthur Weasley's hug, which lasted longer than a welcome home embrace normally would, but the others seemed to understand the need each widower had for the other's comfort at the moment. Arthur had come for the funeral in January and then had returned to spend the Easter holidays with Harry and Richard along with Severus and his family. It had been the week he'd finally been able to bring the baby home from the hospital after nearly four full months in NICU.

Finally, Arthur and Harry stepped back, meeting each other's gaze fondly. "It's so good to have you both back, Harry," the older man said.

"It's good to be back, actually." Harry found himself swept from Arthur into an equally emotional hug from Remus, then passed among the Weasley males for enthusiastic, brotherly hugs.

"Oy, Harry, maybe you'd have been safer with the women," he heard, and he laughed at the amusement in Draco's voice.

"Perhaps. Although at least the Mistery Weasley won't pinch his cheeks and remark on how he needs to eat more, as the women will when they remember they forgot to greet him." Severus' silky voice was as amused as Draco's.

Of course, that just prompted his foster brothers to do exactly what was predicted for the women, and Harry found himself laughingly shoved into Charlie's lap so the wheelchair-bound man could add his own pinch to the routine. He managed an escape when Charlie began a rather enthusiastic poking of ribs in the name of checking if he were too thin.

"Millicent!" Ron cried out, causing the dark-haired, sturdily-built woman to turn from the group with the baby. "Your husband's molesting Harry a bit here."

The Potions professor simply shook her head at the antics of the men, easily distracted by Richard being passed into her arms from her sister-in-law.

Harry found himself in a much less boisterous, but no less welcome, hug from Neville and smiled. "It's not fair that you're taller than me," he muttered to his fellow Gryffindor.

Neville laughed. "I've been taller than you since fifth year. You'd think you'd be used to it by now."

As the men began to sort out seating at the table, Harry's gaze went to the children's table, where many mischievous eyes met his. Where once meals in the Burrow's kitchen had been a sea of redheads broken up only by the darker shades of his and Hermione's hair, the children seated here had much more variety to their looks. With none of the Weasley offspring marrying redheads, the trait hadn't surfaced in many of the children.

Neville's gaze followed his own, and he began to name off the children, pointing among them with ease of practice in the names. His own status as an honorary Weasley after marrying Hermione made him uncle to almost all of the children at the table, and Harry wouldn't be surprised if the non-Weasley children called him that out of sheer peer pressure. The surprise to Harry was the final child introduced, Draco's daughter, Alcyone.

The calm grey eyes that met his when the girl was introduced were pure Malfoy, of course, the same silvery shade that her father and grandfather had. But her hair lay in silky, jet-black braids, as far from the moonlight-blond of the Malfoys as it was possible for hair to get. She returned Harry's smile with one of her own and then ducked her gaze shyly back to her plate.

"Takes some getting used to, doesn't it?" Neville said softly. "I'm just glad I'm more used to Andromeda than Bellatrix when I look at her. Otherwise, it'd be a bit eerie how much she looks like a Black with her inheriting her mother's dark hair."

Harry nodded in silent agreement, glad Draco wasn't close enough to hear the remark. He'd already managed to somehow offend the man twice without knowing how.

Hearing any remark comparing his daughter to his thankfully dead, insane aunt was not likely to help matters in the least. He turned back to the staff table to find the men had enlarged the platform and table to seat all the adults, and he was dragged unceremoniously to sit between Ron and to his surprise Draco.

The redhead elbowed him as the women finally made their way to the table. "We stuck them all on the other side. Figured that way they can pass the baby back and forth among them, at least until they remember there are a couple more babies around to share."

That drew laughs from the men as the women sent mock glares and found seats so that the house-elves could finally serve the meal.

"It's a bit like a Weasley family gathering here tonight," Harry said.

"Of course, mate. We weren't about to let you come home without a proper welcome. Those of us who aren't idiots anyway."

"Who?" Harry did a mental headcount of the redheads and then sighed softly. "Ginny didn't come?"

"She was invited, but Ernie was convinced it was inappropriate for them to be here tonight, at your welcome home party of all things." As he dug in to his food, Harry noted his friend's manners were much improved from their school days, which was probably due to the patient training of Ron's wife Orla. The younger Ravenclaw had managed to add some polish to her husband after six years of marriage.

"Oh." Harry sighed. "It's completely old history, Ron. I wish they'd understand that by now. It's not like I didn't move on."

"Yeah, but I think everything this year for you dug out every bit of guilt all over again for both of them."

"It shouldn't."

"Give it time. They'll come to their senses eventually and realize they're just being stupid."

Harry hoped Ron was right. The last thing he wanted was rumors of a rift between himself and Ginny or her husband. It would cause the papers to dredge up all the old gossip in a heartbeat and probably make up plenty more to embellish it. He had no wish to be pitied again because Ginny had chosen someone else in the final year of the war when he'd been gone on the Horcrux hunt with Ron and Hermione.

Shaking off the pessimistic feeling that had crept up on him when he'd realized the MacMillans hadn't attended tonight's dinner, Harry turned his attention back to those who had bothered to come. It was easy enough to do in the chatter around the table as people rushed to catch him up on the latest news of their family and of former classmates.

He had to laugh when talk turned to the coming school term and much teasing was directed toward Severus about obtaining three Weasley students all at once. He knew something was up when Tonks grinned cheekily across the table at the Headmaster.

"You know, Severus, Remus tallied it up the other night for me. Do you realize that those three are only the first? You'll have a Weasley starting school every single year for the next eleven years, at least."

Laughter erupted around the table as Severus looked horrified at the thought, which prompted Remus to chime in with what was obviously a planned disclosure between him and his wife. "Perhaps he should be more concerned when that eleventh year rolls around. After all, that's the year he gets a Weasley, Potter, and Granger offspring all in the same year."

"I assure you, Remus, that you'll be Headmaster, not Deputy, when that happens, as I fully intend to retire the prior year," came Severus' obviously amused reply. "You forget one of those children is also a Longbottom!"

The laughter went from amused to uproarious then, and Harry was happy to be joining in, though he realized Draco didn't seem to be quite as amused by the jokes.

He waited until the talk had drifted to other topics before asking the blond quietly, "Anything wrong?"

Draco gave a shaky jerk of his head, obviously not wanting to talk. Unwilling to tread where he was unwelcome, Harry turned back to the rest of the table conversation. Whatever was bothering the Slytherin would have to wait until Draco wanted to talk about it. If it kept up, he'd ask Severus, perhaps, but for now, he figured it best to let things lie.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

Getting settled in and ready to teach his classes at Hogwarts took up so much of Harry's time that he let what he'd noticed with Draco completely slip his mind until the weekend before school was due to start. Once word had quietly gotten around that he was back in Britain, he'd also had invitations to bring Richard out to have dinner with the families of his friends. Between those invitations and the non-resident Weasleys, who insisted that Harry had to at least visit their homes for a dinner or two, he actually managed that nearly two full weeks passed without having another dinner in the Great Hall.

This one didn't repeat the noise levels of the first night, thankfully, and he actually managed to have his son perched in a high chair between him and Remus, who'd taken the seat on the other side. "No wife tonight?" he inquired of his adoptive godfather.

Remus shook his head. "Dora's morning sickness has unfortunately relocated to dinner time, and she told me if I hovered around her one more second, she'd see to it that I never had the chance to make her go through it again."

Harry chuckled. "How's it feel to know you'll be a dad again when your youngest is so much older?"

"Probably less weird than it was for Andromeda to have Adrian when she already was a grandmother."

"True. At least Vivian's only nine. Are she and Teddy still happy about the new baby?"

"Vivian's overjoyed. Teddy's at that age where baby's aren't that interesting, even if he will see his sibling more than the average Hogwarts student would if a new baby came along."

"Twelve. The age where Quidditch trumps everything else, including homework."

"Don't reflect happily on that age, Harry. You'll be the one trying to get them to do their homework instead of play Quidditch now." Remus' tone was rueful. "Just when they get over the Quidditch obsession, they'll discover girls and you'll lose their attention again."

Hiding his amusement behind his teacup, Harry shrugged. "I'm just glad that's all they have to distract them these days."

The Deputy Headmaster nodded in agreement. "Thank Merlin for that."

Draco plopped down into the chair on the other side of Harry, looking exhausted. "Remus, is it too late to tell you and Severus I resign as Head of House?"

"He'll simply threaten to make Harry take over instead."

The Slytherin looked horrified. "The Slytherins would riot if they had a Gryffindor Head of House. Besides, he's got Millicent already."

"She told him if he ever tried to make her Head of House, he'd be teaching Potions again himself," Remus explained calmly. They were the first three in the Great Hall tonight, although those with families didn't often dine here, especially as busy as they were with pre-term preparations.

"So it's down to me or him?" Draco asked.

"I'm afraid so. At least you get a sort-of-Slytherin with Harry. That's where the Sorting Hat wanted him, so I'm told."

"What?" The sheer indignation in the surprised exclamation made Harry laugh until the blond glared at him. "How in Merlin's name did you get in Gryffindor if the Hat wanted you in Slytherin? Is that why it took so bloody long our first night here?"

Nodding, Harry spooned a bit of mashed vegetables into his son's mouth before answering. "The Hat was rather insistent that I fit best in Slytherin, but I wanted to be in the same House as my parents." No point in telling Draco that the beginnings of their little rivalry had been one of the other reasons he'd sat under the Hat insisting on anything but Slytherin.

The answer seemed to defuse Draco's ire at the implied insult to his House, and he relaxed back into the tired pose he'd begun with. "I don't know how Severus did it. He had a much more time-consuming subject plus his other duties."

"He took out all his stress on the other three Houses?" Harry suggested with a grin.

"I do remember him taking points from you for breathing too loudly or some such reason."

Chuckling, Harry nodded. "Among other things. And to think he's this one's godfather, after so many years of not wanting me to breathe in his class."

"It wasn't the breathing that frightened me so much as the thought of what you'd miss next in spending half the class trying to fight with Draco," came the oft-abhorred, now-loved voice behind Harry. Severus' hand came out to ruffle the baby's blond hair as he passed by to seat himself on the other side of Remus. "Or what you two would throw in each other's cauldrons next. If I'd taken points for all the proper things, neither Gryffindor nor Slytherin would have had any left after each of your classes."

"We weren't that bad, surely?" Harry asked. Apparently, Richard was done with the whole idea of mashed vegetables, because the latest spoonful was promptly spit out. The baby's comic disgust had him smiling as he switched to the fruit he'd held back for pudding.

"Put it this way," Remus interjected. "From what I heard and saw a bit in the corridors and Great Hall I'm quite glad that Dumbledore didn't double your two Houses up for my class."

That reminded Harry of something he'd been meaning to ask. "I know there's been things done to damp down on House rivalry now, and what Draco and I were doing was rather beyond what color our ties were, but does this truly work? The whole first-years-eating-together and all that?"

"Surprisingly so," Remus answered. "And Severus and I devised a spell to ensure that all years spend equal time in shared classes with the other Houses. I also suggest not allowing your classroom to divide evenly by House. Making sure group projects are assigned as cross-House work tends to help too."

Draco nodded, shaking off the tiredness he'd displayed earlier. "In Runes, I arrange the desks in a big circle and require the students to alternate how they sit. They still end up sorting it out with the more serious or studious students grouping together, but at least it's on ability or ambition and not House ties. But my classes tend to be smaller than what you'll have, Harry, now that Cultural Studies starts in first year and is required through fifth."

The newest professor actually grinned expectantly. "I'm looking forward to all the changes. Muggle Studies sounded like the most boring thing on earth when I was younger, enough that I didn't take it even though it would have been an easy O for me. It's such a useful subject now, and I would have given half my vault to have gotten Wizarding Studies any time in my years here. I'm thirty and still feel half-ignorant of a world I was supposedly born to."

"Considering you've lived on the barest fringes of it for the last decade, you've missed out on a lot. But you've got one of the best resources possible on any confusing details right next door to you," Remus said.

Harry turned to Draco with a hopeful look. "I've got the textbooks from last year that I continued with, but some of the lesson plans seem a bit quirky on the wizarding side. I've cleaned up the Muggle ones. Are you caught up enough to take a look for me and give me any tips on additions to the curriculum?"

The blond shrugged. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be. And Allie's been going nuts wanting to visit the baby again." He had helped Harry finish unpacking, as promised, and his prediction that the little girl would be overjoyed to spend time with Richard had been true. She hadn't even been perturbed by the baby's hearing aids. He glanced to where his daughter was finishing her meal at the kiddie table, nearly done because they'd arrived early. "We're ready whenever you are."

"Now's good for me. Miss the dinner rush," Harry teased. He bid farewell to Severus and Remus as well as the newly arriving professors and their families. Cleaning up the baby with the aid of a cloth instead of a spell, he pushed back his chair and gathered his son, waiting for Draco and Allie to join them for the walk back to Slytherin Tower.

Their footsteps echoed a bit in the corridors, the steady thumps of the men's boots accompanied by the lighter taps of Allie's shoes. Harry was content to walk in silence until Allie slipped between them and reached up to each man with a shy hand. Meeting the other man's eyes, Harry took the offered hand, glad the girl seemed comfortable with him.

"I meant to thank you about sharing your nanny," he said to Draco over her head.

"It didn't make sense to hire an extra nanny when we live so close and Allie loves babies so much. I assure you that Louisa certainly doesn't mind the extra salary. She's probably relieved, since if things work out with you, she'll still have a post when Allie outgrows needing a nanny."

"Makes sense. Bit of an unsettling job to have, watching someone else's children grow up and being out of a job when they do." Harry sighed. "Although eventually, she won't be solely in charge of Richard. Severus has found someone willing to get the training to become Richard's tutor since it'd be hard for him to attend the primary school here."

"Luna probably wouldn't care if he did come to class, but she does have quite a few to educate now."

They'd reached the portrait-door to Harry's quarters, and he spoke the password openly. He'd decided that first night that he had no qualms with his coworker and hopefully friend gaining easy entrance. If nothing else, someone nearby should be able to access his quarters for safety in case Severus wasn't available. It drew a raised eyebrow from Draco, but the blond didn't comment as he ushered Allie inside.

It took only a moment to get Richard settled with his toys, and the older girl plopped beside him on the floor to play in the baby's room. Harry retrieved his lesson plans from his desk in the living room and offered them to Draco as he joined him on the sofa.

"I did have one question though."

"Hmmm?" Draco, who had already begun to scan the parchments, met his gaze distractedly.

"Why do you still have a nanny? Because you're a widower too? The only other nannies seem to be for the nursery age kids."

Grey eyes turned wintery in an instant. "She's a Malfoy. We always have someone to look after us until we leave for school."

The change reminded Harry of the other times he'd somehow managed to offend his coworker and he shivered. "I didn't mean to offend you, Draco. I was simply curious. That's not the first time you've gone cold on me about something I've said, usually about children in general or Allie specifically."

The other man sighed, gaze going to the parchments for a moment, before rising to stare unseeing at the unlit fireplace across from them. "It isn't you, not really." He was quiet for a few minutes, obviously thinking someone over. "I had a nanny, but a house-elf, not a witch," he began softly. "Still have her, if you want to be specific, since she's still at the Manor. But you don't use elf nannies if a child is a Squib."

"Oh." Harry let the magnitude of what that meant sink in. "But she's only nine. Are you sure?"

"We've had every test and potion possible run on her. I won't resort to barbaric means like Neville's uncle did to him, to force magic, but by now, something should show. Severus even tried to look in the Hogwarts' roster, but the damn thing refuses to show anything other than the upcoming students. Even those aren't revealed until a year before the children start."

The information made Harry's stomach lurch. "And what does your family think about it?" Lucius Malfoy might have gotten a pardon after the war because going turncoat prior to the final battle had helped turn the tide, but he was still a staunch, old-fashioned pureblood.

"Amazingly, he's never wavered in how he treats her. She's had him wrapped around her finger since the day she was born." Draco took a deep breath. "As it became more and more apparent that she has no magic, he began to research Muggle schools. The nanny's Muggle-born too. We're making sure Allie's comfortable in both worlds... just in case."

"Ah. That's why you were thrown off by me being so casual about whether or not Richard has magic."

A jerky nod confirmed the statement. "I'm surprised no one mentioned it to you. We had an incident last term with a second year taunting her and the nanny in a corridor. Some people take vicious delight that the Malfoy heir's only child is a Squib, and they pass that on to their children."

"I hope the little brat was punished severely." Harry felt like growling at the thought of some near-teenage child choosing to bully delicate little Allie for something far beyond her control. It reminded him far too much of his own childhood although he'd been bullied by his cousin for having magic.

"Severus damn near expelled him. He's very strict about any of the students bullying the staff's children. As it is, the boy will start off the term with a month's detentions." Draco turned to meet Harry's eyes, finally managing a small smile. "I believe they're to be served learning things 'Muggle style' with you, actually."

Harry grinned, knowing he shouldn't take delight in punishing a third year. "I'll see to it that the child gets a firm grasp on the ways technology can outrank magic then. Plus my classroom can't be cleaned magically."

Draco's smile expanded. "Good. It'll be nice for some of the little cretins like I was at that age to be reminded that the Man-Who-Defeated-Voldemort is damn near Muggle himself."

Snorting in amusement, Harry bumped Draco's shoulder with his and then went to sort out drinks for them both. With luck, he'd be able to remind a lot of the snottier children that it was prejudice that had brought their world to the brink of destruction twelve years ago. It seemed like some were beginning to forget.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

"Harry!"

Hearing his voice called, Harry turned and smiled in greeting as Draco strode down the corridor to catch up to him. He'd just left his classroom after his last class of the day. Today he'd sent Mr. Morgan to the caretaker for his Friday detention after the boy had continued his insolent behavior in the prior two detentions that week. He was looking forward to an evening away from the castle, actually.

Casting a silencing spell around them, Draco fell into step beside Harry toward Slytherin Tower. "I'm glad I caught you. Something's come up with one of my Slytherins, and Poppy and I have to have Wizarding Child Services in to review the case." The blond professor's expression promised dire things towards the parents of his snake if he had anything to say about it.

"Not a first-year if they've hidden it two weeks into term, I hope?" Harry noted. Out of all the changes Severus had instituted as Headmaster, the absolute dedication to rooting out child abuse of the students was the one Harry supported the most. He didn't think a first-year could sneak through the required physicals at the beginning of the year, but it took about three weeks to work through all the students beginning with the first-years, and the scans didn't always pick up on less physical means of abuse.

Draco shook his head. "Fifth-year. His father died last winter and seems like the mother's gotten unhinged in the meantime. He's the youngest and only one left at home, so only one student to deal with, but it'll likely take all evening." He sighed. "But I'd promised Louisa the night off for something. She's agreed to stay if need be but didn't seem too happy about it."

"Want me to watch Allie, then?"

"If you don't mind? I could try to track down one of the others, but she's most comfortable with you."

"That's because I don't guard every little thing I say not to remind her about magic," Harry said. "I'm happy to look after her, although I'd planned on attending a Weasley family dinner tonight at the Burrow. She's welcome to come along, or I can cancel and do it some other time."

"She'll be okay going there. She's been now and then. Fleur's fostered a few of my Slytherins before." The Slytherin Head of House looked thoughtful. "Actually, if you don't mind, ask her if she's got room for one more. I think she'd be a good match for Alfred Kelly."

"Of course." Harry still found it somewhat amusing that while Fleur Delacour Weasley was about as physically opposite of Molly Weasley as could possibly be, she had turned out to be as motherly as the late matriarch had been. Although where Molly had reared her own brood and adopted just a few strays, Fleur had become a full-time foster mother. There was rarely a time when she and Bill didn't have at least one foster child living at the Burrow in addition to their own children.

"Thanks, Harry. I'd better get back to the Infirmary before the boy thinks I've abandoned him to Poppy and Severus' care." With a smile in gratitude, Draco canceled the silencing spell and reversed direction down the corridor.

Harry stopped by his own quarters briefly to pick up extra nappies to add to the bag he'd packed for Richard when he'd dropped him by Draco's quarters with their shared nanny that morning. The dinner invitation had arrived at lunch, when Fleur had managed to secure promises from Ginny and Ernie they'd be there.

Stepping next door, he spoke the password quietly and was shocked at the sound of yelling as soon as the portrait door swung inward. It was neither of the children, but rather the nanny whose voice was raised. Concerned, Harry stepped forward into the room. The nanny's next words made his blood run cold.

"You little Squib, you've ruined my evening plans again! I don't know why I even keep this job. It's not like your father's ever going to be grateful to me for looking after you." The sheer loathing in the woman's voice made Harry want to vomit.

He'd heard enough, but before he could make his presence known, the woman drew back as if she intended to slap the little girl sitting at the table looking resigned. Harry didn't even think twice before he stunned the woman, feeling a sense of dark satisfaction that her head made a solid thunk against the stone wall before she hit the floor.

Ignoring the nanny, he stepped over her to reach Allie, gathering the child into his arms. "Are you okay, love?" he asked, looking around for his son and finding the boy sitting solemnly with one of Allie's plushies, green eyes wide as he looked from the nanny to his father.

"S'okay," Allie mumbled against his robes, her voice subdued. "She had to cancel her date because of me."

"That's no reason for her to talk to you like that. None at all. And no reason for her to dare slap you either." He moved to the sofa with the child, pausing only to send a petrification spell at Louisa on the floor. He'd take no chances the woman would break free of the stunner while he was talking to Allie.

"But I'm an inconvenience."

"No child is an inconvenience," Harry said softly. He had the sinking feeling this wasn't the first time the nanny had berated the child, because her tone had held the flat sound his own had had when he'd called himself a freak in his childhood. He resisted the temptation to rise and give the woman a solid kick for her treatment of the sweet little girl. Tipping Allie's chin up with a finger, he made sure she met his gaze. "And you are a beautiful little girl anyone would be proud to call their own."

"Daddy says I'm beautiful." Tears were welling up in her grey eyes now, and Harry felt a surge of hope that the loving way Draco had always treated the child would make the nanny's abusive behavior easier to overcome.

"Your daddy is absolutely right. It's your nanny who is a very bad woman." He hugged the now silently crying child close. "I'll make sure she never says bad things to you again." By removing her tongue, he thought darkly, knowing he wouldn't go that far with the woman, although Draco's family might. He wasn't sure who the woman would need to fear the most Lucius or Narcissa when this was reported.

When Allie's tears had subsided, Harry sat her gently on the sofa and wiped her tears with his handkerchief. Letting her keep the damp cloth, he transfigured one of Richard's spare nappies into a sling and lifted his son into it. He'd come back later for the rest of the baby's things. Lifting Allie onto his hip, he flicked his wand at the petrified woman, floating her behind him as he headed for the Infirmary.

If she managed to bump into a few walls "accidentally" on the way, he felt not a second's guilt. She deserved each and every bruise, and besides, his attention was on the children he carried, not some resentful bint who'd directed her ire at a defenseless child. His timing couldn't have been better if he'd planned it; he met the representative from WCS in the corridor outside the Infirmary.

The woman raised a brow at the nanny, who had no obvious injury yet still remained utterly frozen.

"It seems you've two cases to investigate tonight, Mrs. Reid," Harry explained.

"Are the children okay?" she asked, shifting her attention to the important matters immediately.

He nodded. "I think so."

At that, she opened the door to allow him to enter ahead of her and didn't comment when the nanny made another "accidental" bump of her hip into the door jamb on the way through. He figured she'd probably wanted to do that sort of thing a few times herself over the years, working a job like hers. He thumped the woman onto an empty bed just as Draco rounded the privacy curtains of a hospital bed.

"Harry? Is something wrong with Louisa?" he asked.

"I caught Louisa yelling at Allie. Before I could stop her, she tried to slap her." Taking a deep breath, Harry reminded himself to mind his language with the children right in his arms. "I did stop her before she managed that, but I'm not sure if she'd done it before."

The blond's expression warred between rage at the nanny and concern for his daughter. Concern won when Allie raised her head and turned, reaching out for her father. Taking her and going to sit on a bed, Draco cuddled the girl close while Harry strode forward to find Poppy. He suspected calming draughts might be in order, as well as physicals for both children. He hoped today had been the first time the woman had become physical with either child, but he knew words were as damaging if spoken often enough.

When the fifth-year boy who'd been the original reason WCS had been called realized what had happened with Allie, he'd insisted that the little girl be seen first. It took just under an hour for Allie to be questioned gently by Mrs. Reid. Once Louisa realized she was well and truly caught in being abusive by Harry, she confessed easily and was taken away by an Auror. Draco reluctantly left his daughter to oversee the interview with Alfred Kelly, after Allie quietly assured him she was happy to stay with Harry and Richard.

He found them when he was done, having a tea party of sorts in the far corner of the Infirmary. Harry had managed to bring Allie out of her shell with his antics at transfiguring items for their tea party, getting her into outright giggles when he'd made them all matching pink hats and feather boas. Richard was happy to play with the soft feathers, munching on one end of his boa as he sat with his hat lopsided. A house-elf had been happy to provide actual tea and miniature sandwiches for the party.

"Is this a private tea party, or am I invited too?" Draco asked his daughter, shooting Harry a relieved look at how carefree Allie seemed to be.

"What do you think, love? Do we let your Daddy join us?" Harry asked her.

She tilted her head sideways to study her father, and then nodded. "He needs a hat and feathers, Harry."

With a grin, Harry transfigured the required items, resisting the urge to laugh at how silly the blond looked. Draco took the empty seat at the little table, doing his best to look dignified as he took a tiny sandwich and a cup of tea. After a bite or two, he studied his daughter, unable to stay completely playful. "I'm sorry, Allie," he said, voice cracking. "I didn't realize..."

The little girl shot out of her chair and flung herself into her father's lap, knocking her hat to the floor. His teacup spilt on the table, but Harry cleaned away the mess quietly. Allie hugged Draco tightly. "I know you didn't, Daddy. I should have told you."

The pain in the grey eyes that met Harry's over the girl's dark hair made Harry's heart ache. He felt equally guilty because he'd never noticed anything off in the nanny's behavior either. They'd been so very lucky he'd not held that Friday detention as planned and had shown up early to get the children.

"I want you to promise you'll tell me immediately if anything ever happens like this again, Allie. No matter who it is."

She nodded. "Uncle Harry made me promise him too."

The pain ebbed as gratitude took its place, and Harry smiled. "Seemed a bit silly for her to keep calling me Mr. Potter at a tea party," he added. "But I think our tea isn't a real dinner, so we should go find some."

Allie wriggled around to look at Harry. "Can we all have dinner together?" she asked hopefully. "Not in the Great Hall?"

"Oh, Merlin. You had dinner plans, Harry," Draco said, looking abashed.

"I'm sure the Weasleys will understand." Harry began to return the transfigured items to their former state, gathering Richard into his arms. "I might even impress young Miss Alcyone there a bit further and cook dinner for us all if you like."

"Oh, really? You can cook, Uncle Harry?" the girl asked, sounding intrigued by the thought. "No house-elves?"

He nodded. "With and without magic."

Draco's agreement was a foregone conclusion as soon as Allie turned pleading grey eyes his way, and the walk back to Harry's quarters was passed with the girl quizzing Harry about what he could and couldn't cook. He set her to play with the baby with a promise he'd start teaching her to cook soon, and Draco followed him into the small kitchen alcove.

"I can't thank you enough," he said quietly.

"No thanks are necessary," Harry replied. "I just wish I'd done more than stun her and bump her into a few walls."

"I'm scared to hire someone else. What if they turn out to resent her too?"

Harry paused in pulling items out of the cold cabinet and nodded. "Maybe you should consider a house-elf," he suggested. "At least then you know she's safe from anything like that, and honestly, I think having a nanny just makes it more obvious to everyone that she's different than the other young children."

The other man sank into a chair at the table and looked thoughtful. "You're right. I'll ask Mother to send over the elf who cared for me as a child."

"Good." Harry flashed him a reassuring smile. "Now get off your lazy backside and help me chop vegetables for dinner. Allie likes carrots, right?"

Laughing, Draco rose to help, and Harry felt a surge of satisfaction. As horrifying as finding out how the nanny was treating Allie had been, he'd helped put an end to it and the children would be safer than safe now, under the dedicated care of a family elf.

And Merlin help anyone else who hurt either Allie or Richard. Harry was utterly in love with the little girl, and anyone else who mistreated her would find themselves getting more than a stunner from Uncle Harry.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

Harry stood, arms crossed, watching the third-year cleaning his classroom floor with scrub brush and bucket. He'd started out the detentions fairly easy on the boy, intending to allow for his youth and possible poor parental influence. Draco had been a right prat at that age, after all, but mostly just parroting his father's prejudices. Graham Morgan was a half-blood with one Muggle-born and one Muggle parent. It hadn't stopped the boy from being as arrogant perhaps more so than Draco at his worst.

The boy had been foolish enough to expect Harry Potter to go easy on him, in light of both having Muggle-born mothers. He'd been wrong, and the resentment that rolled off the boy as he completed this detention was almost tangible. The first night Harry truly had gone light, figuring having a detention the first day of classes was rough on any teenager. But when that one had ended, young Morgan's insistence he'd done nothing wrong in taunting a child four years younger had raised his professor's hackles.

The detentions were currently a month's worth of Monday, Wednesday, Friday detentions, to give the boy time to complete his homework. But if things kept on the current path, Harry had a feeling he'd be seeing the boy for a true month's worth of detentions. He'd have the cleanest classroom in the castle at this rate.

"You're done for tonight, Mr. Morgan," Harry said at last. The boy had cleaned all the desks of what little had accumulated during the week and gotten the floor shiny clean. His first week of detentions had taught him not to try to shirk on his work when he'd been made to redo anything he slacked on and been threatened with a Saturday detention with the castle caretaker added to his punishment.

The boy shoved his dark fringe back and shot his professor a resentful look as Harry banished the dirty water and sent the bucket and brush back to their storage place. He

stood there, shifting from foot to foot, waiting tensely for a dismissal.

Although he knew the Headmaster had already gone over this with the boy, Harry couldn't help trying to talk sense into him. "Do you have a problem with Miss Malfoy personally or just anyone different from you?" he asked.

Morgan shrugged. "My father says it's just punishment, her being a Squib."

Harry frowned. "I'm not sure I'd care to agree with anyone who thought a child should be punished for what a parent or grandparent had done or that being a Squib is a punishment. Is there something wrong with your father or grandparents that they lack magic? They're not any different than Miss Malfoy in that aspect."

"They were born like their parents."

The sheer stupidity of that logic made Harry want to shake some sense into the boy. "Yet your mother wasn't. By the logic you're giving me, your mother is being punished for something her parents did wrong, as they birthed a child so different from themselves. Or is your father being punished because he married someone different from himself and had a magical child?"

If the boy scowled any harder, Harry thought his eyebrows might meet his lips. "That's different!"

"How so? Miss Malfoy appears to be a rather sweet, well-raised child. Although I must say, you're doing a good imitation of the behavior of the pureblood prats I went to school here with. Is that what you want to be compared to? You're certainly spouting the same sort of filth some of the children of Death Eaters did to me and others like me."

"Her father was a Death Eater!"

"And if you'd bothered to pay attention in History of Magic, Mr. Morgan, you'd know that I testified for the man at his trial. What would you have done if someone held your mother captive and swore they'd kill both of you if you didn't join up?"

"I'd have died first, and she'd have wanted the same!" The heat in the youth's voice would have been amusing, had the topic not been so serious.

"Easy enough to say when you're not face-to-face with one of the most evil men ever to grace our world." Harry uncrossed his arms and moved to stand directly in front of the boy. "And regardless of his choices, the end result is that Professor Malfoy saved my life. Without his aid, Voldemort might still live."

Morgan grimaced and Harry sighed, realizing he was wasting his time. "You can go to dinner now. I'll see you after classes on Monday for your next detention. I'll be perfectly clear with you. If I even so much as hear a whisper of you bullying any child in this castle for being different than yourself in any way, I will make sure you serve detention until the end of term. Understood?"

The teenager gave a jerky nod of his head and fled the classroom, leaving Harry to seek his chair. He buried his face in his hands with a groan.

"He's still being a little berk?"

Green eyes met grey as Harry looked up at the newcomer to his classroom. "If I hear a sentence start out with the words 'my father' from him again, I might regress to third year myself and hex the boy," he admitted.

"Giving you flashbacks to my own rash youth, then?"

"And then some. I'd like to think he's the exception in his prejudice, but I know better. Has Allie had any more trouble out of him or other bullies since term started?"

Draco shook his head. "None so far, but it's early yet. I think it'll help she's been seen with you and that Richard's known to be yours. No one wants to risk your wrath by doing something in front of your child's nanny."

Harry snorted in derision at the thought. He sighed and began to gather up the scrolls and Muggle exercise books students had turned in today and stuffed them in his bag. "Did you need me for anything?"

The other man hesitated before bringing a newspaper out and handing it to Harry. "Tomorrow's *Daily Prophet*. Father still has contacts there, so someone owed him this earlier today."

Taking the paper, Harry wasn't sure he wanted to look. It had to involve him if Lucius had found it urgent enough to send along. Reminding himself he'd faced down a Dark Lord multiple times, he unfolded the paper and sighed.

A photo of him, obviously from the Welcoming Feast, showed him shaking his head as he listened intently to Neville and then clapping. When he thought back to the Sorting, he wondered if someone had snapped the picture when he and Neville had been discussing what Houses the three young Weasleys would be sorted into. He'd won the bet, surprising considering how long he'd lived abroad. But he'd heard enough family stories to know that Percy's daughter Molly was a sure shot for Hufflepuff, and he had a strong guess that Ginny's daughter Abigail would follow. Victoire Weasley was so obviously a Ravenclaw that the Hat hadn't even settled on her head, reminding Harry of Draco's sorting.

Some idiot at the *Prophet* had put a new spin on things, one Harry had dreaded, yet expected.

"Once-Jilted Harry Potter Sees Lover's Child Sorted. I swear, do they drop the reporters on their heads in the gutters there? Of course I saw Abigail sorted. I'd have to be blind to have missed the child, MacMillan surname or not!"

Draco laughed. "I suppose you were expecting something like this then?"

Harry nodded. "It was inevitable, with me returning to Britain the year Ginny's daughter started Hogwarts. Maybe it'll blow over quickly, once everyone realizes there's no bad blood between Ginny and me."

"Depends, you know. I'm surprised they haven't run some sort of poor widower piece on you already."

Wadding up the newspaper and tossing it in the air, Harry sent an Incendio at the offending wad of paper. "Considering only close friends and family truly knew for sure I was back before the Welcoming Feast, I figure that'll be the next round," he admitted.

"Perhaps you should control the publicity? Give them an interview or two or give Luna's father an exclusive just to rub it in their faces that you won't deal with the *Prophet*?"

"There's a thought." Harry flashed Draco a grateful smile, liking that he got a warm, pleased smile in return from the other man. "I'll ask her at dinner. I can't beat the *Prophet's* trash to press, but at least I can get something out there officially."

"The paper's not the only reason I came. Father also thinks he's found someone who might be useful to you to train as Richard's tutor. I think Allie's babbled so much about the baby in her letters that she's recruited him to help out."

"That's something that Mr. Morgan would never believe," Harry said in amusement.

"His loss, if he's insisting on being daft. The man's a Squib from a family that was pretty much neutral in both wars. Not the sort of family that worried about having a Squib

in the family so he's attended good Muggle schools. He just doesn't have the funds to continue his education."

"Ask your father to set up a meeting then. I'd like to at least have a chat with him."

"I'll let him know. Are you up for a dinner at the Manor? I know Mother would love to play hostess to you and meet the baby Allie's raving about."

"Sounds good to me, as long as it's on a weekend. I don't want to be rushed because of class the next day." Shoving the last of the homework into his bag with a grimace and shouldering it, Harry led the way to the door. "I've enough headaches marking all these assignments."

Draco laughed. "You're the professor, Harry. Just remember when you assign homework, you're stuck with marking it!"

"It's the best way to figure out where the students are, assigning essays. The last professor was mostly competent, but I hate that Severus got saddled with a wizard raised professor. I almost wonder if the two classes are better separate than linked." He sighed as they made their way down the corridor. "I'm not exactly expert on the wizarding side of things. I've read about the traditions and all, but they don't always make sense."

"We can always mark papers in the evenings together, if you like. I can give the Wizarding Studies ones a look over."

"Sure you don't mind? That's giving up a lot of your free time to help me out."

"Free time?" The blond wizard chuckled. "I don't think you've had time to notice, Harry, but I spend almost all my free time with my daughter. She's certainly not going to object to hanging about your quarters after dinner."

"I wasn't sure if you were dating or something like that."

"Not bloody likely. One marriage was plenty for me. I'm not looking for someone just out for the name or fortune, and that's all most want."

Harry sighed, glancing at the man he was beginning to see as a friend. "I'd have figured Lucius would be after you to remarry, considering..."

"The first try was such an unmitigated disaster that he says he's staying out of it. He's spent the last three years trying to find loopholes in the Malfoy inheritance requirements to allow for an adopted heir or a female one, if Allie somehow shows magic."

"She can't inherit otherwise?"

"She can inherit a large sum of money, yes, and some of the family properties, since there are dowry and purchased properties that aren't entailed to a male Heir of Malfoy blood. But the magics on the Manor especially are so deeply inlaid they require a wizard to inherit them."

"Bit stupid of your ancestors to require a male heir of the blood."

"Yeah. At least the Blacks had a failsafe of inheritance through the distaff line."

"Distaff? I thought it was me being Sirius' godson?"

Draco shook his head. "You've never given that family tapestry at Grimmauld a study, have you?"

"No. Should I?"

"You should. You're a Black yourself, closer than me actually if you're looking at distaff lines. Your Potter grandmother was a Black, aunt to Sirius' mother and my grandfather."

"Oh. And all these years I've felt rather odd for having the Black fortune and properties." Harry looked thoughtful as they reached his quarters, not really minding as Draco followed him inside. He tossed his bag on the sofa and turned to the other wizard. "By those rules, then I guess that means you'd be the next in line, yeah? Since Teddy's further down the family tree?"

"That depends on whether or not Richard is a wizard, since his disability doesn't matter for the magical inheritance, just that he's a wizard. As for me, I'm not entirely certain. I think you'd have to restore Aunt Andie to the Black family officially for Teddy to be legally able to inherit anything entailed. And I'd have to check Mother's marriage contract. I wouldn't be surprised if it disavows a claim by the actual Malfoy heir. The Blacks wouldn't have wanted to be absorbed into the Malfoys, even if they liked a marriage alliance with them."

"Ugh. It's all too complicated for my liking."

"That's why Father's been digging around for loopholes. He's smart enough to admit that the family inheritance requirements are too restrictive. It's one thing to require a magical heir when the properties themselves are so deeply magical they can't be controlled by a Squib, but basing it on gender too is just asking to have the places abandoned."

"I wonder how many of those there are now, abandoned magical homes that no one can access anymore because the families died out in the wars," Harry said thoughtfully. "I should find out which of the Potter properties, if any, are entailed to a magical heir, and whether or not an adopted heir is allowed. My will has Teddy as my heir, as my godson, after Richard, but I hadn't thought about Andie being disinherited, since Sirius was, but still inherited."

Draco snorted. "Aunt Walburga might have burned him off that tapestry, but I guarantee you he wasn't truly disinherited or else his brother or father restored him in regret later. Grimmauld Place would have closed itself up until an acceptable magical male heir turned up otherwise. Besides, you might have other children."

"Perhaps. But I'd rather know all the details and not feel quite as ignorant about wizarding law and such. There's no guarantee I'll find someone again, or that I'll have magical children at that."

"Harry, you're probably the most powerful wizard in Britain. I know Richard's mother's Muggle so maybe that's got you concerned, but honestly, the odds have got to be really low that your children would be Squibs."

That earned him a soft smile from Harry who took down the picture of himself with Jessie and Jamie. "Do you know why Richard's mother is a Muggle?" he asked softly, turning to watch him closely.

"I just assumed you were living Muggle and fell in love with her?" Draco sounded completely puzzled by the question.

"Close. I met her because I was working as a teacher in a Muggle school, yeah. But I wasn't married to his mother, Draco. I was married to her brother. Jamie just agreed to be our surrogate, so the baby would have both our genes. The Muggles can manage that sort of thing with technology."

"Oh. You're gay then?"

Looking for any sign of repulsion and not finding any, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He'd not wanted to ruin the burgeoning friendship with Draco. He hadn't seen the sort of prejudice in the wizarding world against homosexuality that he'd seen in the Muggle one, but he'd been known to miss pretty big cultural clues before. "Yeah. Women don't interest me in the least."

"So all the fuss about you and the youngest Weasley wasn't true?"

"I don't deny it was a bit of a shock to realize she'd moved on, but it gave me a bit of a shove in the right direction at least," Harry admitted.

"Well, there's your angle with the widower piece then. Just give them a few happy wedding photos of you and your husband. That'll make them forget you ever dated a ginger girl who married someone else."

Harry laughed. "Distract them with the truth?"

"Of course. The female population will be so sympathetic toward you after that sort of thing that it'll be long forgotten."

Placing the photo back on the mantle, Harry mulled it over. "I'll look through photos this weekend to find ones I'm willing to share. Thanks, Draco."

"You're welcome." Still facing the family photo, Harry completely missed the blush creeping over his companion's fair skin and the other man's assessing gaze. Draco shifted and cleared his throat. "We should probably head down to dinner."

Lost in thought, Harry agreed.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

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Harry stretched sleepily in bed, glad he'd added the quilt to the thin blanket he normally used. Now that October had arrived, it wouldn't be long before he'd need a nice, thick duvet as well, and to start keeping the fireplaces lit. He rolled and checked the bauble that worked as a monitoring charm for Richard and noted the baby was awake but content to play with one of his soft plushies. He tended to like soft toys, abandoning the harder ones he'd been given in favor of the small army of plushies, half of which, Harry suspected, belonged to Allie.

The little girl had spent a lot of time with Harry and Richard, with and without her father (or house-elf). She seemed content with the elf, Sadie, but wheedled her father into dropping her by Uncle Harry's any time he had rounds or Head of House duties when Harry wasn't busy. Harry loved having her around, although he had to admit to himself that he was enjoying her father's company as well. Draco made a point of visiting for half an hour or so each time he picked up Allie, and Harry had cooked meals for the four of them more than once.

Hearing a knock at the door, Harry threw the bedcovers back and reached for his dressing gown. Even though it was extremely early for a Saturday, it might be a student at the door, and it wouldn't do for him to answer wearing nothing but pyjama bottoms.

"Oh, hi." He flashed Draco a smile and looked for Allie, but the blond was alone. "Did you need something?"

"I hate to ask you to watch her again, but I don't like leaving her alone with just an elf so much." Draco's expression was apologetic, and Harry motioned him to step into his quarters.

"I told you I was happy for her to come over any time you like. I'd planned on a trip to Diagon Alley this morning for some things for Richard, but I figure Allie would enjoy the baby shop. We can have lunch and get ice cream."

Looking relieved, Draco smiled. "I knew Severus would watch her, but she always seems happier here. Not so solemn."

Harry chuckled. "That's what having a jolly uncle around is for, keeping smiles on little girls' faces." He stepped into the kitchen alcove. "Got time for breakfast? We can tell Sadie to wake Allie and bring her over." Regardless of answer, he began assembling items for breakfast, not paying attention as his dressing gown slid open.

"Breakfast sounds brilliant, actually." Draco called for Sadie, relaying instructions, and the neat little elf popped away.

Cracking eggs into the pan, Harry turned his attention next to flicking pieces of nicely-browned toast into the rack before rummaging in the cold cabinet for jam. "Blueberry or strawberry?" he asked, turning with both jars in his hand.

Draco didn't answer immediately, and Harry was puzzled for a brief moment until he realized the blond was staring quite openly at his chest, which was laid bare by the loose dressing gown. The admiration was unexpected, as Harry hadn't seen any indication the other man was interested in men. He knew he was in good shape; Merlin knew being married to a sport nutritionist had kept him that way, and he'd not lost the eating and exercise habits even ten months after Jessie's death.

"Draco? If you're considering me for the jam instead of the toast, we'd have to work that out later," he said, opting for a teasing flirtation rather than simply ignoring the other man's interest. As the blond's skin became tinged with a rather appealing blush, Harry plunked both jars down on the table and returned to his eggs.

"Sorry, Harry."

Harry glanced over his shoulder as the other man plunked gracelessly into a chair, seeming torn between watching him work and studying the floor to hide his embarrassment.

"No need to apologize." Satisfied that his charm was doing well by the eggs, Harry started up the bacon before turning back to face Draco. He'd best sort this out now and figure out what was going on, or it might damage their friendship.

Opting for boldness, he moved to stand in front of Draco, tipping his chin to make the blond look up at him. "Curiosity or interest?" he asked bluntly.

Grey eyes widened, but Draco's pale skin still retained the rosiness from blushing. He cleared his throat before answering huskily, "Both."

Stroking the other man's chin, Harry heard the door open to admit Allie and likely her house-elf. "Later," he promised. He closed his dressing gown and made sure it was tied properly before turning back to the cooker to finish up breakfast. Part of him felt a twinge of guilt at the flirtation, but he knew Jessie wouldn't expect him to be celibate forever.

"Perfect timing, Allie," Harry greeted the little girl as she came into sight. He scooped eggs and bacon onto plates and brought them to the table, returning for the toast rack. "Sadie? Can you fetch Richard?" he asked the house-elf, who grinned happily at the thought of the baby and disappeared.

As they settled in to breakfast, Harry remembered he'd not asked Draco about why he needed a babysitter. "Will you be busy all day?"

The blond shook his head. "I've a meeting with my parents at Gringotts to settle what we can of Allie's inheritance. Father's found a school in Buckinghamshire we've got an appointment to tour next weekend. It's supposed to be one of the best Muggle girls' schools." He looked thoughtful. "I know it's a lot to ask of you, but perhaps you might like to come along?"

"I'd be happy to, although my experience with British schools is limited to my primary school and Hogwarts. The American system's rather different. Not many boarding schools either."

"I'd rather she not go to boarding school, but it'd be rather hard to explain how she gets back and forth since none of the family's well-versed with Muggle transport."

"You could buy a home or flat in a city with an acceptable school. Floo from here to the place you tell the school you live in and then walk her over, or she can learn to use public transport. That's what I was considering doing for Richard, if I don't have a suitable tutor by the time he's ready for primary school. I don't want him away for long periods of time that young."

"That's an excellent idea. Sending her off to a Muggle boarding school seems a bit like tossing her in the ocean without teaching her to swim. But you'll still attend the tour with us?" He reached out to stop Allie from her attempt to put half the jar of jam on one piece of toast.

"Happy to. Can't have my favorite girl going off somewhere we haven't explored completely." Harry flashed Allie a warm smile, which she returned happily. She didn't seem concerned with the conversation about her future, and he figured she'd heard plenty of those as her family tried to plan for all eventualities. "Perhaps she and I can start sorting out Muggle transport today, if you don't mind. I'd planned on just Diagon Alley, but we can go exploring in London a bit."

"That sounds fine, if you don't mind. Perhaps you can take her to one of those food places the Weasleys go on about." A buzzing sounded, and Draco started for a moment before laughing and tapping his wand to end the alarm spell. Pushing his chair back, he thanked Harry for breakfast and kissed Allie atop her head. "I'm running late."

"I'll see you tonight, yeah?" Harry asked.

Draco nodded, his blush from earlier returning just enough to tinge the tips of his ears. Without another word, he headed for the door, leaving Harry to plan his day with the kids.

Realizing he hadn't heard Allie's matter-of-fact chatter to Richard in a few minutes, Harry went to his son's room. The scene was rather endearing: Draco's dark-haired daughter was curled up protectively around his pale-haired son, both sound asleep in the boy's small bed. They'd had a good day in Muggle London, visiting a chain restaurant Harry had wanted to try and getting in a bit of shopping. She'd been delighted with the new food and had talked him into bringing takeaway so her father could sample it for dinner. He'd spoil her a bit when they'd stopped by the toy shop, but he found it fun to buy things for a little girl, and her fascination with the Muggle toys had wrapped him firmly around her little finger.

Hearing Draco call out, he covered the children with a blanket and headed back to the living room to greet the other wizard. "How'd it go at Gringotts?"

Settling onto the sofa, the blond eyed the shopping bags curiously but answered the question. "We got it settled that, witch or not, Allie gets a property in Highgate and another in Greece. Both are in highly Muggle areas and can be easily converted to Muggle if necessary for her but let her still have a Floo."

"Highgate? I think there's some sort of high-end school there, too, that you might look into, especially if you already own property there. Not sure if it allows girls, but it's likely they do now. I'll bet Hermione would know, since she grew up in Clerkenwell."

"I'll check in with her, then." He indicated the shopping bags. "Dare I ask what Hamleys is?"

Harry grinned impishly. "Our children's new favorite place in the entire world. Even Richard was enthralled when we walked through the doors." He reached for one of the bags, beginning to sort out the toys and presenting Draco with a hot pink box containing a slender blonde doll. "Allie discovered Barbies today."

The other man looked puzzled, inspecting the box and turning it around to read the adverts printed on it. "Muggle dolls are strange," he said at last.

Chuckling, Harry nodded. "You've no idea. And Barbie has accessories too." Out came a box containing a pink convertible car and, after an enlarging charm, a two story dollhouse, followed by several packages of clothing for the doll. "I figured if she ends up in a Muggle school, she'll fit in better if she knows what types of toys girls obsess over. If I can remember what these are, and I'm male, then I figured it was a good place to start."

"You didn't have to do all this." Draco seemed at a loss for words.

"I wanted to. The toy store was a bit of a last minute thought, since I wanted to get a treat for both the kids. I may have gone a little overboard." A box of brightly colored Legos joined the doll's things. "These are for her to take home. I got a bunch of games and puzzles and stuff to keep over here, which Richard will be old enough for eventually."

Grey eyes met now-anxious green ones as Harry thought he might have overstepped in wanting to spoil Allie as much as Richard. "Thank you, Harry. This is the sort of thing she needs that I don't think about. So she'll fit in properly."

Relieved, Harry sank to the sofa next to Draco. "What's the point of having a near-Muggle uncle if I can't keep her sorted out?" he quipped.

"You really are fond of my daughter." The intent interest of the morning had returned to Draco's expression, although Harry thought it was less physical in nature right now.

"Honestly, Draco, she's the sweetest kid I've ever been around." He closed the gap between himself and the other man slowly. "I suspect I'm becoming rather fond of her father too." The invitation was obvious, he hoped.

Apparently it was, because Draco's lips met his hesitantly. Thrilled at the contact, Harry slid his hand into the silky hair at the nape of the blond's neck and slid his tongue along Draco's bottom lip, seeking entrance. As soon as it was granted, he deepened the kiss, encouraged as Draco's hands sought his chest, exploring his contours beneath the light jumper he wore. Harry couldn't help his half-smile when they finally parted, moving to nuzzle at the soft skin of Draco's throat.

Draco groaned, pushing at Harry and breaking the contact. "Harry, I can't if this is just a one-off," he managed. "I have to be careful with Allie around."

That worry just endeared him further to Harry. "Have I ever struck you as the type to simply want to get off and have no further ties?" A quick jerk of the blond's head relieved his budding worry he'd somehow managed to make the other man think so poorly of him. "I adore Allie, and I'd like to see where this," he motioned between them, "might go."

"I've never been with another man."

"I'm not going to rush things, Draco. Kissing me tonight doesn't mean you've got to shag me immediately," Harry said softly. "Or ever, if you decide you don't want to cross that line."

"It's been a long time since I slept with anyone. Too many want to sleep with a Malfoy, not me personally. Hoping for a ring and the money," Draco admitted.

"Well, I've money of my own, and we can't legally marry in Britain, so you're safe on both counts with me. I much prefer if we leave our famous surnames at the bedroom door." Harry ran a gentle hand down Draco's robe-clad chest. "Call me Potter or mention my scar in bed and I might hex you."

Draco took a deep breath, his eyes darkening with the slow movements of Harry's hand. "I'd like to see where this goes, then."

The husky admission was all Harry needed to close the gap between them again, seeking the sweetness of the other man's mouth. The children would be up from their nap soon enough, but in the meantime, he was going to set out to sweetly lay the path to seducing his very own dragon.

For the first time since the horrible winter night when he'd been called to the hospital to learn he was a widower and a father at the same time, he felt truly alive.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent, Draco Malfoy.

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Marking essays had to be the worst part of being a professor, Harry reasoned. He missed the quick multiple-choice or true-false tests of his science classes in the Muggle world. He chuckled as that thought gave him an idea for the Muggle Studies side of things. Some of those students might go on to seek Muggle uni degrees on top of wizarding apprenticeships, and Merlin knew there were a variety of homework types at a uni beyond essays.

Other than that, he truly enjoyed the Cultural Studies position. With Draco at hand, he was able to fill in gaps in his own knowledge on the wizarding side, and it was a joy to see wizarding-raised children finally grasp concepts such as computer use and the purpose of mobiles. If the spells necessary to use electronics within a heavily magical place like Hogwarts weren't so complex, he suspected the castle would be plagued with mobile-carrying teenagers like any other school. As it was, he had to take the time at the end of the day to renew the protective spells, and once a week he went over the solar panels mounted outside each of his classroom windows to ensure they fed into the classroom's electrical system properly.

Putting aside the fifth-year assignment on the Muggle educational system, Harry stretched and checked the time. Draco should be back from rounds soon, and that made the dark-haired wizard smile. It had been two weeks since that first heady night of kisses on the sofa, and he'd set a sedate pace that was driving him slowly crazy. But he didn't want to rush the other man into his bed, so instead he'd held himself to lingering kisses and gentle massages. It had taken him months to work up the courage to sleep with his college boyfriend, and while the relationship had ended amicably as post-college life took them in different directions, Harry had often wished he'd waited for such intimacy and had that first experience with Jessie.

Too restless to stay seated, he checked on the children and smiled gently as he saw the two sleeping. With Draco's Head of House duties, Allie had fallen asleep sharing Richard's small bed several times before Harry had simply requested the house-elves to add another bed to his son's room. Most nine-year-olds would have hated to essentially share a room with an infant, but she seemed to delight in being around the baby. He wondered if Allie saw Richard's deafness as making him the odd one out, much like herself, due to her lack of magical ability. If things went badly with Draco, it would break his heart not to be around the little girl daily as he was now.

Nodding to Sadie where she half-dozed in a little chair in the room, Harry made his way back to the living room just as Draco entered. He cupped the other man's face in his hands and kissed him in greeting, delighting that the kiss was returned with enthusiasm.

"Catch any miscreants tonight?" he asked when they finally came up for air.

Draco laughed. "Four couples being less than prudent about where they carried on with each other. At least they were all fifth-years and up tonight."

Leading the blond to the sofa and helping him shrug out of his teaching robes, Harry grinned. "I'm still disturbed about the third-years I came across snogging the life out of each other. At that age, I was too petrified to hold a girl's hand, much less snog her."

"Don't tell me you were shy? I always figured you and Hermione had practiced with each other, as close as you seemed."

Drawing the blond close, Harry shook his head. "The only girls I ever kissed at Hogwarts were Cho Chang fifth year and Ginny sixth year. That year we spent on the run, looking for Horcruxes, Hermione and I were together in really close quarters almost constantly. Even when Ron was gone, there just wasn't that sort of attraction between us."

"Maybe because you're gay? You said you didn't realize it truly until you were attending uni."

"Possibly. Although I suspect I'd never have been attracted to Hermione even if I found women arousing. We were so close so young that she's always been my sister in all but name."

"Makes sense, I suppose. I was rather relieved when my father didn't try to make a marriage alliance with any of the girls I grew up with. It would have felt a bit unsavory to bed a woman I'd once played with while we were in nappies."

Harry stroked Draco's arm, fingers exploring the bare skin. He liked it when the other man wore Muggle clothing under his robes, since it left skin bare to explore without pressing the issue. "He told me at dinner after the school tour that he worried any British witch might be too closely related to you."

"Purebloods never advertised the number of miscarriages and stillbirths they had, not to mention the Squibs. It would have been admitting something was wrong with all the intermarriages," Draco said. "He thought himself very lucky to find a woman who had a Scandinavian father and Spanish mother. Plenty of fresh genetics, he thought. He blames himself for Allie being a Squib, you know."

"I'd noticed. He loves her though. I don't think I've seen a more devoted grandfather." After Lucius had turned traitor at the end of the war to save his family, it didn't surprise Harry that the Malfoy patriarch was utterly dedicated to finding the best future for his only grandchild.

"Honestly, you'd have thought she was his, when she was first born. There hasn't been a girl born alive into the Malfoy family in five generations. And Mother still buys out half the dress shops in Diagon Alley."

"What about her mother? No one ever seems to mention her." Harry had tried to question Severus discreetly about Draco's late wife, but the older wizard's negative reaction had convinced him quickly to wait for the information to come from Draco himself.

It took so long for Draco to answer that Harry began to think he'd offended him. "Tilda was disappointed Allie was a girl and wanted very little to do with her. Ironic, as she could have asked for the moon from my father and gotten it. She miscarried once about three years after making him a grandfather, and it seemed to make her extremely resentful of Allie. She accused me of not having a proper interest in a wife to give her children. We were never close, so I let her leave and was looking for a way to break the marriage contract when she died."

Harry pressed a kiss to the top of Draco's head, feeling horrible for bringing up obviously bad memories. "She missed out on something amazing, leaving you and Allie."

Draco turned in his arms to claim a kiss, so obviously seeking reassurance of being wanted that Harry wished his wife were still alive so he could hex the woman silly. Pushing aside the thought of the snobby witch, he slipped his hands underneath the thin material of Draco's shirt, feeling a stab of guilt as his fingers found the scars that caused gaps in the soft hair that trailed down the center of the blond's chest. He'd caused those scars with his curse sixth year, and he promised himself now that he'd kiss every last inch of them.

He was surprised when Draco pulled away from the kiss, not to speak again, but to reach for the hem of Harry's own t-shirt, tugging it up. Green eyes questioning, he let the other man tug the garment off. They'd thus far kept clothing on, removing temptation.

"Tonight I'm staying," Draco said softly, grey eyes darkened to near-black with need as his fingers sought the soft, dark hair on Harry's chest.

Nodding because he'd suddenly lost the capability to speak, Harry rose from the sofa, tugging Draco up and leading him to the bedroom.

Harry woke to the very welcome feeling of being a pillow to his lover. He smiled, playing with the strands of blond hair that made such a contrast to his own tanned skin. He'd never been the more experienced lover in a relationship, not even with Jessie, and last night had rewarded his patience in waiting for Draco to signal when he was ready. He'd fulfilled his promise to himself to kiss the length of every scar he'd left on the other man with his curse sixth year, which had driven any shyness far from Draco's mind about bedding him.

"I could get used to waking up like this."

The drowsy comment made Harry smile. "I hope you intend to. I'm not sure I can go back to letting you go back to your quarters every night."

"I'm not sure I could manage walking back either." Draco raised his head and studied Harry before smiling slowly. "If it weren't for the children, I'd wish we figured out how this would be back in school."

Harry agreed, other than the joy he'd had in his marriage to Jessie. So many of the wounds he'd carried from his neglectful, abusive childhood and then the chaos of his years at Hogwarts had been healed by the unconditional love he'd had from his husband. "We both needed to grow up a lot for this to be possible between us."

"True." Draco claimed a kiss, nipping lightly at Harry's bottom lip. "We'll have to talk to Severus, if I'm to move in. Or it might be better for you to move in to my quarters. Less confusion for the students in my House."

"I don't mind moving over, if you're sure you want to go that far," Harry said. "Are you sure you're ready to go public? It's going to raise media interest, you know."

Draco shrugged. "I could care less what the newspapers say. Our families will accept it and be happy for us."

"Even your father? I know he likes me now, but there's a world of difference in accepting me as your friend and Allie's 'uncle' and knowing we're a couple."

The blush that Harry found so endearing appeared to color Draco's face. "I spoke to him last week, actually, when Allie and I had dinner with him and Mother." He dropped his head and nuzzled at Harry's bare chest. "He told me he'd already meddled with my life enough, and he didn't intend to ever do so again."

Harry couldn't help feeling a little shocked. Even knowing how diligently Lucius had searched for a way for his granddaughter to be the Malfoy heir, he was surprised he'd easily accept his only son being in a same-sex relationship that would seemingly complicate the possibility of more children. "And what did your mother think?"

"She stated that if we remained serious about the relationship, she expects you to allow her to spoil Richard as endlessly as she does Allie."

"Why do I have a feeling we should ask Severus to just link the two quarters together so the children can have an entire room just for their wardrobes?" Harry asked in amusement, feeling rather relieved at what appeared to be a very easy acceptance from his lover's parents.

"Because you've seen Allie's wardrobe and you're a clever man?" Draco laughed, sitting up in bed and running a hand through his hair. "I think they figured it was headed this way between us, after we went on the school tour with them."

As Draco appropriated Harry's dressing gown for a trip to the loo, Harry lay in bed staring at the ceiling thoughtfully. He knew some might see them as moving their relationship too swiftly, considering they'd moved beyond friendship only recently. But there were few secrets between them since they'd straightened out a few misunderstandings after he'd returned to Britain. The near-stalker behavior they'd had in their rivalry had ensured they'd know more about each other than the average couple did starting out.

Allie would be overjoyed if they shared quarters. Richard seemed content around Draco and adored Allie. With his concern about the elder Malfoys set to rest, the only potential objection that meant anything was Severus, and Harry had begun to suspect the older wizard had seen the possibility this would come to pass. He'd certainly made plenty of opportunities for them to spend time together, including a suspicious lack of scheduled times to supervise dinner in the Great Hall the last month or so.

Harry was distracted from that train of thought by Draco's return. The blond checked the monitoring charm on the children's room, and Harry's gaze followed. Both offspring were sleeping contentedly, and the sound of his dressing gown hitting the floor drew Harry's attention back to Draco. They had an hour or two before the children or the outside world would intrude, and with a welcoming grin, he tugged his lover back into bed.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent, Draco Malfoy.

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Harry released his first-year Muggle Studies students five minutes early when the Headmaster appeared in the classroom doorway. He knew Severus wouldn't mind waiting, as it wasn't unusual for him to pop in and observe a class for any of the professors, but with the Halloween weekend approaching, the children had been terribly restless without additional distraction. The only child who didn't stir was Allie, who sat at one of the classroom's ten computers with headphones on.

Finally the last student flowed out of the room to go to eat lunch, leaving Harry with only one lesson after that before the weekend. Severus indicated where Allie still worked, fingers steadily typing on the keyboard. "I take it the students don't seem to mind a younger child among them?"

"They're actually more tolerant of her than some of the Muggle-born children actually."

"Any more trouble with Mr. Morgan?"

Shaking his head, Harry leaned moved around tidying the classroom for the afternoon's double Muggle Studies for fourth-years. "I don't think he's changed his opinion on the subject, but he's learned to keep his mouth shut at least."

"Sometimes that's all we can hope for. If it happens again, we'll have to be far sterner with him."

Harry shrugged. He didn't personally care if Severus expelled the little brat. Just because Hogwarts was the most preeminent school for magic in Britain didn't mean it was the only one.

"What is she working on so diligently?"

"A computer program that teaches typing. I owl-ordered a few things for younger children, but I think the first-years would like to try that one out. It's more entertaining than theirs is."

"Test out which has better results. Being wizarding-raised children, I doubt they'll even care it's a program for younger children. We can switch to that one next year if it works out better."

Nodding, Harry decided to take advantage of Allie's activity to question Severus about her status. "How sure are we that Allie's a Squib?" he asked softly.

The sigh from the Headmaster was heartfelt. "As you recall from Neville's childhood tales, most children show magical ability by her age, even if it's just something simple like levitating a toy that's out of reach. She can't activate magical toys that draw off a child's inherent abilities, such as toy brooms. If she weren't from one of the oldest families, those guaranteed a place at Hogwarts, not getting a Hogwarts letter could simply mean she doesn't possess enough magic to qualify for the school."

"You have to qualify? But I was told my name was down for Hogwarts from the time I was born." Harry looked puzzled. "I always wondered how I could be told that, if you can't simply look up whether or not Allie's on the list."

"I'd imagine that was one of the old man's many exaggerations, although to be honest, as a Potter, the only thing that would have prevented you from attending Hogwarts would have been if you'd been unable to use a wand. No one's entirely certain how the Hogwarts enrollment book works, only that the magics are as old as the school itself."

"So the Muggle-born students are all more powerful students, on average?"

"It varies. One-quarter of each year's new student openings must be reserved for Muggle-born children. Of the remainder, Ancient and Most Noble Houses are the first selected and then those of any family who have had at least five generations attend Hogwarts. After those spots are filled, then children are selected by ability from strongest to weakest."

"And how many get turned away on average?"

"For every forty students we take each year, there are usually anywhere from fifty to one hundred children we don't have room for. As there are three other schools here in Britain, it's not worrisome. Although if not for the tradition for the oldest wizarding families always attending Hogwarts, I would prefer Hogwarts go by ability alone, regardless of birthright. There are far fewer true branches of the old families now, so it has become less of a factor aside from the Muggle-born quota."

"I never did feel it was really fair on some like Goyle to have to struggle along." Harry watched as Allie's program ended, figuring he'd best wrap it up. "So if Allie gets a letter, then we know she's at least got some hidden magical talent, but if she doesn't, she's a Squib, and we move forward on the Muggle schooling plans."

"She's gained a strong advocate in you, I see."

Harry smiled up at Severus. "Which I suspect you planned on, what with putting me next door to Draco's quarters and all."

"I will admit it did cross my mind that you would be good for her." Dark eyes met green, some of the intensity Harry remembered from his school years present in Severus' gaze. "I am very pleased that you have turned out to be good for both of them."

Keeping his voice low as Allie tidied away her headphones, Harry asked a question that had plagued him. "And were you playing matchmaker as well?"

"I suspected Draco's inclinations weren't toward women, but he'd been conditioned all his life to marry and produce an heir. He'd have never acted on such impulses before his marriage. I'm pleasantly surprised with how far he and Lucius have come that he feels free to do so now."

Harry nodded. "Not that I'm complaining."

Then his attention had to leave Severus for Allie as the little girl came to join them. "Ready for lunch, sweetheart?" he asked.

She took his hand after giving the Headmaster a sunny smile. "Sadie's going to meet us there with Richard, right?"

"I'm sure they're already there waiting for us," he told her and let her lead the way toward the Great Hall. Severus was quiet beside him, and Harry wondered if he was considering Allie's future as deeply as he was.

Harry had the subject of magical inheritance lurking at the back of his mind through his afternoon class and into the evening. His quietness was noted by Draco, although the other man didn't remark upon it until the children had been tucked into bed for the night.

"Something on your mind, Harry?"

"I was thinking about Allie and what happens if she doesn't get to attend Hogwarts."

"Well, we've got almost two years to worry about that. I'd figured we'd secure her a spot in a good school, just in case. With her birthday at the end of July, we'd have a month to cancel the Muggle spot if she got a letter."

That caught Harry's attention, as he realized he'd overlooked a rather important bit of information about Allie. "When exactly in July?"

Draco grinned, snuggling close to the other man. "She shares your birthday, actually, although if she'd been born an hour earlier she'd share Neville's."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me that earlier. Or somebody didn't."

"I'm glad you're happy about it. Imagine when all your birthday cakes are pink or covered with flowers because she wants to share a cake with you."

Harry's grin was possibly wider than Draco's. "I don't mind a bit. If it makes her happy, I'll eat nothing but pink birthday cake from now on."

"You know, you're almost as besotted as my father by my child."

"If anyone had told me I'd be proud of sharing a trait with your father twelve years ago, I'd have thought them completely barmy, you know."

"Strange to realize you do have traits in common, isn't it? Although I suppose they lead back to the same one adoring one's family."

"I always thought you had some sort of cold, remote upbringing."

"Not in the least. Oh, appearances were highly important, and you never saw my parents show affection in any manner they felt was undignified when I was a child, but it was always there." The blond fiddled with Harry's fingers, seeming to compare his long, pale fingers to Harry's shorter, more work-roughened ones.

"I noticed that even after the Battle. Other families were clinging to each other as if they'd never let go, yet you three were rather dignified despite the grime on everyone. Although I did notice that your mother didn't let go of either of you in her sly little ways of keeping you linked together."

"I suspect if you hadn't intervened, that pair of Aurors would have had to do bodily harm to her to have taken either of us away that day." Draco flicked his wand out of the wand holster, studying the hawthorn's polished surface. "She was the only one who had a wand at that point, at least one that worked properly. And then you came striding over to thank me so profusely for the use of my wand and returned it."

Harry chuckled. "I think the Aurors nearly died of shock to realize I'd used your wand to defeat Voldemort."

"Implying I'd cooperated in that somehow was rather Slytherin of you."

"I owed both you and your mother directly and your father indirectly. You could have identified me at your manor. Your mother could have alerted Voldemort I was still alive. Your father could have led Severus to Voldemort instead of warning him to flee, and perhaps he would have died then, all things considered. I might not have figured everything out in time. So, no matter what the intentions were for any of you, I couldn't see you carted off to Azkaban, even if only until trial."

"We were lucky you survived. Only Mother would have managed to stay out of Azkaban otherwise."

"Possibly." Harry hesitated, unsure if the other man knew. "I was told after the Battle that I could ask any boon I wanted of the Minister, and he'd grant it. I asked him to ensure you remained free, since I knew Severus was safe."

Draco twisted to meet his lover's gaze. "Aside from gratitude for the wand or for not identifying you, why would you use that sort of power to save me?"

"At the time, I wasn't really sure, other than I didn't want you to suffer any further from trying to save your mother's life and your own. Merlin, Draco, if I'd had the same chance to save my mum, I can't say I wouldn't have made the same damned choices you did."

"Well, indirectly you saved Father too. The Minister figured a long house arrest was preferable after you vaunted my mother a hero."

Harry's thumb stroked the silvery, pale remainder of Draco's Dark Mark. "Does it bother you, to still wear this?" he asked softly.

Draco shuddered, trying to pull his forearm away. He'd done his best since they'd first slept together to keep Harry away from the faded Mark. "I loathe having it. I try to see it as penance, like Severus does, but it doesn't work that way for me."

"And if I told you it could be removed?"

"I'd call you a liar, if you were anyone else. But you've pulled off miracles before."

Smiling, Harry brought Draco's forearm to his lips, kissing the ugly remnant of desperately made choices. "I've offered to remove Severus', after I came across information how to do so when I was in America. This sort of linked mark is used over there, not for the abhorrent things Voldemort chose, but as part of a marriage bonding ritual."

Wide grey eyes held a glimmer of hope. "So you know the reversing charm?"

Harry nodded. "Divorce isn't as rare among wizards there as it is here, so being able to remove the marriage mark is important. Severus let me study the magic left in his Dark Mark to determine how similar they are, but he wouldn't allow me to remove it."

"Do you have one of those sort of marks?" Draco frowned, making his lover smile to realize he was probably trying to catalog every inch of skin he'd seen on Harry. Harry had a magical ouroboros tattoo encircling one ankle, but no others.

"No. I looked into it when Jessie and I got married, but it wouldn't have worked properly on a Muggle. Like the Dark Mark, the marriage marks tap into a person's magic. My ouroboros is magical, obviously, with the color changing it does. I could have spelled that same tattoo onto Jessie, and it would have simply been a fancy-looking bit of ink work."

"Are you sure you can remove it?"

Rather than reply, Harry reached for his wand. The removal charm was complex, so not something he'd attempt wandlessly. As sweat prickled his forehead, he threw a bit more power into forcing the ugly mark to not just fade away, but to remove every last trace from Draco's skin. In theory, he'd surmised anyone could remove the Dark Mark, with its maker well and truly dead. In reality, he was finding that apparently some of the power level used to inflict it was required to remove it.

"It's gone." Draco sounded so awestruck Harry couldn't help but smile. "Merlin, I could feel your power washing over my skin."

"Yeah?"

Draco nodded. His grey eyes were as dark as when he was aroused, and Harry realized he just might be. He'd noticed close displays of Draco's power often made his body very much aware of the other man, more so the longer they were together. Placing a tender kiss over the milky-pale, unmarked skin, Harry led his lover to bed to celebrate the removal of the lingering reminder of the symbol of the chasm that had kept them apart for so long.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent, Draco Malfoy.

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It felt rather surreal to Harry to be sitting at a table on the verandah at Malfoy Manor, watching Allie hold both of Richard's hands so the baby could toddle along with her around the garden. Both children were delighted with the obviously magical place, which had flowers running riot despite the approach of English winter outside the garden's confines. He supposed the charms to shelter the place were a bit like having an invisible greenhouse or sunroom.

What made it even stranger was that he was sitting companionably with Lucius Malfoy. Draco and Narcissa had headed indoors, because the Malfoy matriarch was enthusiastic about the suite of rooms she had set up for her son and his partner in the family wing. Glad he'd escaped questions of redecorating the rooms, Harry took a sip of his drink and looked askance when he realized Lucius was studying him and the children.

"It's rather like you and my son were meant to come together," the older man said at last.

"What do you mean?"

"Look at the children. They each have coloring or features that seem to be from each of you. Allie's dark hair and slightly darker coloring and young Richard's green eyes match yours. She's got the Malfoy eyes, of course, but then his hair is nearly as light as mine."

Harry had to agree with the man's observations, at least on the surface. "When I took Allie into London, there were a few people who thought she was my daughter," he admitted. "But I don't think Richard's hair will stay that shade."

"Was his birth mother blonde?"

"She was, although her hair was a bit darker than her brother's. More of a honey blonde, whereas his was about the same color as Narcissa's actually. A bit less platinum, a wee bit more gold."

Lucius surprised Harry by chuckling. "I suspect that the exact shade common to Malfoys is a partly magical issue. I'm told it doesn't usually exist in adults among Muggles without some sort of potion to lighten hair. Narcissa will be glad to hear of the comparison, I think."

"She seems very happy about Draco and me."

Finding the man's intent gaze on himself a bit unnerving, Harry wondered for a moment if the tolerant Lucius he'd heard of for the past decade and seen in past months was about to morph into his earlier self. The man's next words absolved that worry. "We both are. There are many things I would change about the past if I could, but an important one of them would be convincing Draco to marry when I was well aware he had little interest in women."

"How did you know that when he didn't seem to?"

"I may be many things, Harry, but unobservant isn't one of them. In an earlier time, he'd have married, produced an heir, and sought a lover on the side once he realized where his true feelings lay. If I'd had any idea about Muggle technology that could produce a child such as you used, I would never have sought a marriage contract for him at all."

Surprised, Harry studied Lucius for a moment. "Is that why you aren't upset about us?"

"Partially. You have to understand that I want above all things for my son to be happy. After my choices nearly led to his death and only your interference kept him out of Azkaban, I knew I had to change. The issue of an heir pressured me into a further misstep with him, but if I understand anything about you, I doubt you'll object to Draco having another child or two."

"I'm surprised you're willing to delve that far into Muggle technology."

"Since Severus detailed how your son came to be, I've been researching it. It seems the only real obstacle is money, when one wishes a child, and that's something I have plenty of. When the time is right, and you two are ready for another child, I'll have all the appropriate information waiting for you." Lucius sipped his drink, glancing out to watch the children as they played with the animated tendrils of one of the magical plants. "I've even got information that Muggles have the possibility to combine the genetic material from two males."

"That's not done for humans yet." Harry remembered reading about the process of androgenetic embryos, but only in mice, if he recalled correctly. "I don't know that I'd want to risk the possible problems of that level of experimentation, providing you could find someone even willing to do so."

"Perhaps proper funding for research for a lab with a witch or wizard on staff. Magic might be able to ensure safety of the process."

Harry shook his head. "Maybe. But I'm still not sure I'd risk it. Magic was able to offset several issues Richard had from being a micro-preemie, but even magic couldn't repair his hearing. I'd be afraid of similar with any experimental genetics, not to mention technically Draco and I are cousins."

Lucius sighed. "There is that, and I did search far and wide to avoid inbreeding for Draco, even if it ended up a bad choice. It wouldn't bother you to have multiple children you were raising who had only Draco's bloodline?"

"I could care less, to be honest. I know there's a lot tied to having a magical male heir of Malfoy blood, but aside from that, I'd be perfectly happy adopting children neither of us were biologically related to."

After a moment of watching the children intently, Lucius turned back to Harry. "Draco tells me you had some questions about the House of Black and your own options for an heir."

"I don't want to keep the two Houses tied to one heir, if possible, but with no guarantee I'll have another child, I wondered what options I have for setting another Black male as my heir. My first thought was Draco, but he said there might be something in your marriage contract that barred him from inheriting."

"He is correct. Normally, marriage contracts between any of the twelve Ancient and Most Noble Houses require voiding maternal lines of inheritance to avoid the Houses being combined. You're in the situation you're in, Head of two Houses, simply because someone got sloppy when Dorea Black married Charlus Potter. Sirius took advantage of the oversight in designating you as his Heir."

"Draco suggested I reinstate Andromeda to the Black family so my godson could be designated Heir."

"A good solution except for one small problem. There's a Black male closer to you in the normal lines of succession than either your godson or my own son, if Andromeda is restored to her rightful place."

Harry was puzzled for a moment and then laughed at himself for missing the obvious. "Adrian?"

It seemed Lucius was equally amused. "I am not certain that your godfather would appreciate the irony of that situation, you know."

"I am not certain that Severus will appreciate it either." Harry grinned. "But I'll arrange a dinner with Andromeda and Severus soon and talk to them about it. Thank you."

"I'm just glad that my incessant digging into British wizarding family trees is of service. Severus' family name is Muggle, and his mother was disinherited from the Prince line. Foolishly so, on her father's behalf, because his son died without issue and an excised family line can't be returned without a head of family to do it. Rather than allow his half-blood nephew to inherit, Xavier Prince let everything go to a remote male pureblood cousin whose last connection to the Prince name is four generations back. I've met the man, and calling him wizard is a generous appellation since he's barely capable of using a wand."

"I'd like to look at your research sometime. I've heard you've got the best library in Britain concerning the wizarding family lines here. Some of it might be interesting to introduce to my Wizarding Studies class."

"Perhaps at the Christmas holidays we could start looking over my research. I think..."

What else Lucius had been about to say was cut off at an ear-splitting shriek from Richard. As the two men leapt from their chairs to rush to the children on the far side of the garden, the baby's cries changed from fearful to hiccupping sobs.

When they reached the children, Allie had Richard swept high in her arms, eyes closed and sobbing herself while Richard clung to her, tapping her shoulder in his signal for attention. Lucius dropped to his knees next to Allie, rapidly examining both children for signs of harm.

Harry attempted to take Richard from Allie, but his effort caused Richard to hold tighter to the little girl, his sobs becoming angry screeches with each gentle tug. Deciding to leave the boy be for the moment, Harry searched the area while Lucius continued his scans.

The worried grandfather reached out to lift both children into his arms. "I can't find anything medically wrong with either of them, Harry, but she won't answer me at all." He began walking swiftly toward the Manor. "I'll summon the family Healer from St. Mungo's. The garden's well warded so I don't know what could have frightened them so."

Harry wasn't sure what was worse: the crying of the children or the tinge of terror in Lucius Malfoy's voice.

Two hours later, the only change in Allie's state was that she had stopped crying, mostly due to the calming potion the Healer had spelled into her. He'd done similar for Richard, but even the potion's effect hadn't gotten Richard to let go of the girl. Every time they'd tried, the baby had screamed in outrage, and Allie's own agitation increased. They'd decided it was best for the time being that the children be left to cling to each other.

Harry was roused from his worried state by the sound of a familiar stride as Severus' boot heels clicked along the polished manor floors. The black-haired wizard swept into the room, going directly to the children. He sat on the bed and caressed Allie's cheek before turning to Draco. "Narcissa Floo-called me. She thought I might be able to Legilimency since Allie refuses or can't speak."

Draco assented, his hand squeezing Harry's. They both shot Narcissa a grateful look, glad she'd thought of an alternative even under her obvious worry for the children.

Severus aimed his wand and spoke the spell softly, and Harry watched as Allie's eyes glazed over slightly. But the Headmaster pulled away far too quickly, turning to explain. "I have no idea how, but she's got shields up, well-constructed ones. I could break them down, but the process would be painful and could make things worse."

"Don't." Harry nearly choked on the word, remembering his own Occlumency lessons fifth year. They'd made their peace with each other, but that particular set of bad memories persisted for Harry. "Try Richard before you try anything that might hurt her."

With an understanding look, Severus stroked Richard's hair, gaining the baby's attention. As green eyes met black, both were quiet for several minutes, and then Severus went utterly still. After a moment, he leaned in and placed a kiss on Richard's forehead, signing "thank you" to the boy.

"Severus? Did you find anything?" Draco's voice cracked, and Harry dropped his hand to slip an arm around his waist.

The Headmaster seemed to be mulling something over before he answered. "Alcyone is not a Squib."

Narcissa was the first to respond to that revelation. "Is this some sort of accidental magic?"

Severus shook his head. "Not precisely." He met Draco's gaze evenly across the bed. "Your daughter cannot be a Squib because she's a Parselmouth."

When none of the Malfoys responded, Harry spoke up. "Are you certain, Severus?"

"The children were watching some insects among the flowers when a snake appeared at their feet. She snatched the baby up, causing him to scream in fright. She ordered the snake to leave them alone, but then looked terrified and started sobbing. There's nothing wrong with Richard other than he is very attached to Allie and knows something's wrong with her right now."

"She shows symptoms of shock," the Healer broke in. "I wasn't sure why, since neither had any sort of injury. But it's possible the snake frightened her badly enough to induce shock, especially if the baby started screaming and she thought he was injured."

Draco's voice was soft. "Are you sure it was Parseltongue, Severus? He's just a baby, so how would Richard know? He can't hear well, after all."

Severus' expression was grim. "I don't know if it was proximity to Allie or what, but I know Parseltongue when I hear it."

Harry had heard enough of Voldemort's time at Malfoy Manor to understand the collective shudder of the three adult Malfoys at the reminder of why Severus was familiar with the talent. He tried to disperse the darker thoughts. "Then I suppose Allie and I have more in common than messy black hair," he announced, reaching out to take the girl's free hand.

Stroking her wrist with his thumb, Harry spoke softly to the girl. "Allie, sweetheart, I'm sorry the snake scared you so much, but you did a wonderful thing in telling it to go away in its own language. It's the same kind of magic I have, talking to snakes."

It seemed to get through to the girl at last and her eyes fluttered open, wide and fearful. "You can do it too?"

Nodding, Harry gave her a reassuring smile. "The first time I ever talked to a snake was a boa at the zoo. Is this the first time you've ever spoken to one?"

Allie gave a hiccupping little cry of distress and shook her head.

"It's nothing to be afraid of, sweetheart. It makes you a very special little girl, actually." He felt Draco's hand join his own in comforting Allie, glancing sideways to see the blond nodding in agreement.

"But my mother said it was a horrible, wicked thing to know and told me if I ever did it again, I'd be sent far away because it would make me evil."

Not for the first time, Harry felt an intense desire that Tilda Malfoy was still alive to face his wrath. By the gasps from the others in the room, he suspected he wasn't the only one.

"Just because a bad person or two was a Parselmouth doesn't make the talent a bad thing, Allie." Draco's tone was loving. "It just means you're a unique little witch."

Trembling lips moved into a hesitant smile. "It means I'm a witch?"

"Oh yes, my darling. You're our very own special witch." Draco reached out and dragged both children into his lap, cuddling them close. "And a very good big sister for protecting Richard even when you were frightened yourself."

As the little girl drifted into a sleep influenced by the calming potion and the gentle rocking of her father, Harry met the eyes of the other adults in the room. By the look of Lucius and Severus both, there would be an investigation into Tilda's behavior around her daughter. But overlying the anger all of them felt was a bright sense of relief.

There was no longer any doubt that Alcyone Malfoy was a witch, and that was a blessing indeed.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

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\\Parseltongue\\

In the month it took Severus and Poppy to gently work through the usual mental shields Allie had managed to erect for herself, Harry thought of ways to lay the groundwork for the child's acceptance at Hogwarts as a Parselmouth. He'd be damned before he let her go through the trauma of having an entire school's worth of children swearing she was dark due to having a rare magical skill, especially after her own mother had terrified her so badly of the skill the girl had managed to block her own magic. Not that Severus would ever allow the large-scale mistreatment of any child that Dumbledore had routinely overlooked, but when it came to a child he loved, Harry was taking no chances.

A quick trip to Muggle London, and he came home with pair of snakes, grinning at the variety shop owner had that he knew didn't exist before snake breeders got involved. The docile rat-eaters were easy to care for and non-venomous, unlike the majority of magical snakes. While he wouldn't mind a venomous pet, it wasn't a responsible choice while living in a castle full of children or in consideration of Richard's looming toddlerhood. Allie had happily claimed the lavender corn snake, exclaiming happily and refusing to believe the pretty coloration wasn't from magic. In typical child naming tactics, the snake was promptly dubbed Lavender. The little male snake didn't seem to mind the feminine moniker, so it stuck.

He'd been surprised to see a reverse stripe High White California King Snake in a London shop, but the owner had indicated the snake was sold to his shop by an American family whose child had outgrown the novelty of owning the snowy white snake with its obsidian back stripe. He had let the snake wrap around his wrist, its coloring reminding him so strongly of Hedwig that he almost put it back. But he'd decided at last that his first pet would be honored he selected another pet with her coloring in mind. He hadn't shown himself much more creative than the nine-year-old in pet naming. His sweet natured little snake was simply called Frost.

Both snakes had been happy to find themselves among humans that could speak to them, although seemed puzzled that the talent wasn't widespread.

Harry introduced the snake in his third year Wizard Studies class, figuring the Muggleborn or Muggle-raised children less likely to know of either Voldemort or himself having the skill. It wasn't well-documented in the biographies and histories posted after the war that he was a Parselmouth, although it featured prominently in Voldemort's.

The children filed in, darting puzzled glances at their professor, who sat reading at his desk with the snake draped across his shoulders. Prompting from him before the class had started had Frost pretending to read along with him, her delicate black-marked head swaying back and forth. It was all Harry could do not to laugh at their expressions and the overheard whispers of "Is that snake reading?"

His amusement carried him through the entire class covering wizarding musical instruments, especially when Frost enjoyed the music and "danced" along to a few of them. At the end of the class, he distributed a parchment among the students. "If any of you want to know more about playing an instrument, there will be classes offered in the evenings next term for third years. Which instruments will depend on how many students indicate an interest and in what. Beyond the introductory term, it is up to you to consult with your parents for continued music lessons, although arrangements can be made with the Headmaster for a musical tutor to visit the school evenings or weekends. Now off to lunch with the lot of you."

It was one of the changes Harry had liked about Hogwarts, the extracurricular activities that had been added. The school couldn't justify a full-scale musical or art program, but single-term introductions via his classes let the children get a taste of something and then left it open to their parents to continue lessons. There was even a "scholarship" fund to provide continued lessons for any child whose parents couldn't afford the extra expense.

As expected, the students didn't make their usual stampede to the door, so common to classes just prior to lunch. Some did drift that way, but finally a Ravenclaw spoke up. "I've never seen a snake like that," the boy said. "What kind of snake is it, Professor? A magical one?"

Harry shook his head. "It's a California king snake, originally a North American breed but found over here due to pet shops." He stroked the underside of Frost's jaw with a finger. "Frost here is a bit of a specialty of breeding. Most commonly this type of king snake has banded stripes, black and white. Her color phase is called a reverse stripe."

Since the first question had been answered, another child piped up. "Is it venomous?"

"No. All king snakes are non-venomous, unlike most magical snakes. They eat other snakes and reptiles, rodents, birds, eggs, and generally anything small enough for them to follow. She's fully grown, by the way. They don't get much bigger."

"My brother has a ball python," came a soft voice from the back. The girl was one of his shyer students, the only Muggleborn child in a family of four children. "He's as long as I am tall."

"I used to have one that size in my classroom in America." The snake had been popular with the middle school boys in his science classes. He saw nothing in the students' faces that indicated any great fear of the snake now twining down his right arm. "I know that snakes are traditionally associated with Slytherin House and by some older wizards as a dark creature, but they make nice pets. Does anyone here know what rare magic talent is associated with snakes?"

The two Slytherin students exchanged glances, and the girl seemed to be volunteered to speak up. "Parseltongue." Her answer got her blank looks from her classmates,

so she elaborated. "Speaking snake language."

"Five points to Slytherin." Harry smiled. "It is a talent often attributed to the founder of Slytherin House so I'm glad House history is still being handed down properly. It's a very rare talent in Britain, almost exclusively confined to his descendants, but more well-known especially in the Americas and Asia. I've heard that it's so common among wizards in Indonesia that snakes are the most commonly preferred familiar there."

The Slytherin girl, proud of earning points, grew bolder. "There's a rumor in our House, Professor, but I've never seen any confirmation of it."

"What would that be?" House lore still persisted, history and little secrets not readily shared across House lines. Severus didn't discourage it because students did need things to take pride in about their House, so long as such lore didn't become the source of bullying or strife. Draco had already informed him that his talent was an unconfirmed secret in Slytherin.

"That you're a Parselmouth." When he nodded, the girl looked thrilled. He imagined she'd be rather popular in her common room tonight, to be able to bring back proof of such a rumor.

"There have only been two known British Parselmouths in the past century, although since it has been considered a Dark talent for at least that amount of time, there could have been others who simply chose not to disclose it. The talent is neither Light nor Dark, simply rare here, much like being a Metamorphagus or Animagi." He waved the children toward the door. "Off to lunch before your housemates eat it all."

The children scattered at last, and he realized belatedly that none of them had asked for a demonstration. The pre-lunch timing of reminding students of his ability had been on purpose. By telling one class and then taking the snake with him to lunch, it would be all over Hogwarts by dinner.

"That was nice," Frost said. "Will we do it again?"

"As long as you're not tired, I have two more classes this afternoon." With her assent, they headed for the Great Hall to finish setting his plan to make the residents of Hogwarts comfortable with Parseltongue.

Draco entered their bedroom from the bathroom, clad only in his towel, casting a drying charm on his hair. He watched Harry, who lay on the bed with Frost on his bare chest, chatting idly to the snake. "I should find the sound of you talking to her abhorrent, but instead it's a turn-on," he said.

Laughing, Harry bid the snake goodnight and set her on the floor so she could seek out the small habitat he'd created for her beside the wardrobe. "Why's that? Everyone says they just hear hissing. Not really my idea of sexy."

"I think it's because I can feel your magic just like when you're casting a spell." Draco discarded his towel and slid into bed next to Harry.

"Ah. Makes sense then." Remus had forewarned Harry, once he'd realized that he and Draco were involved, that magical pairs often found themselves becoming sensitive to the magic of their partners. It wasn't something Harry had experienced before, since he and Ginny had barely dated and his partners since had all been Muggle. The level of the sensitivity was often reflective of the individual power of each half. Draco was a powerful wizard in his own right, so it wasn't shocking they were beginning to sense the other's magic quite clearly when near each other. "Feels a bit like a tingling all over now, doesn't it?"

Draco chuckled. "I'm starting to understand why Andromeda looks a bit dazed if she's nearby and Severus has to cast something that taps into Hogwarts' magic. Can you imagine the boost to his own power?"

"I imagine it'd be almost like a firewhisky buzz for someone not used to it. Andromeda's had a decade to do that, at least. I wonder if that's why Dumbledore was single throughout his career as Headmaster." Harry might not hold the man in the esteem he had as a youth, but he had to acknowledge the man had been the most powerful wizard of his age.

"Might explain it. I always wondered about him and McGonagall, you know. We had a bet in Slytherin about it, but then there seemed to be truth to what Skeeter published about him and Grindlewald, at least as far as his brother admitted."

The reminder of Dumbledore's sexuality one thing he did have in common with the meddling old man - made Harry thoughtful. "I wonder if he'd have been less of a manipulator if he had moved on, or if he'd become a father. I can't imagine allowing any children to go through the things he allowed, not as a father myself."

"I still wonder at my own father's sanity, all things considered."

Harry tugged Draco close, wrapping his body protectively around the other man. "At least he woke up before he lost everything truly important to him. It's too easy to let hate rule your emotions instead of love."

"It's amazing you didn't," Draco said softly. Harry had spent more than a few late nights curled up like this with his lover, filling in the blanks of his life before Hogwarts.

"Hate would have made me too much like them. I just kept fighting to be the opposite of that, and look where it got me. I have a wonderful family, a great job, and I've fallen in love twice when some don't even manage it once."

Draco went completely still in Harry's arms, then turned so that grey eyes met green. "Do you mean that?"

"I know we haven't said it officially, Draco, but it's rather obvious what we feel for each other." Harry interrupted himself to claim a kiss, his mouth exploring Draco's tenderly. "But I'll state it boldly so you know for sure. I love you."

The blond's breath hitched as he buried his face in Harry's shoulder. His voice was half-muffled as he replied. "I love you too."

Harry gently urged Draco to meet his gaze again. This wasn't exactly how he'd planned on asking, but naked in bed wasn't exactly mundane either. He stroked the other man's cheek. "I want to make our family as official as possible."

"We can't marry..."

"No, but a civil partnership is just splitting hairs, isn't it, legally?" He smiled. "Nothing stops us from calling each other what we like or even having a ceremony for our friends and family."

"My mother would be ecstatic to plan something."

"So that's a yes?" Harry's smile widened into a full-fledged grin.

"Yes, Harry." Draco's own happy expression changed to something more intense as he moved to pin Harry beneath him. "As long as it means getting to make love to you for the rest of our lives."

Harry had no objections to that and joined Draco to demonstrate exactly what lay in store for them.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 13

After a car accident leaves Harry Potter a single father of an infant, he returns to Britain and the wizarding world, as well as a much-improved Hogwarts. His next-door neighbor in Hogwarts is fellow single parent Draco Malfoy.

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"Quit fussing and come on, Draco. We're late already," Harry called in amusement. They'd brought their children and belongings to Malfoy Manor for the Christmas holiday, but had plans to meet for a group dinner with the other young Hogwarts professors to celebrate the end of term. The blond was having a harder time leaving the children in his mother's care than Harry, seeming to endlessly remember one more thing to tell Narcissa.

Draco's pale skin slightly flushed with embarrassment as he realized what he was doing, and he came to join Harry at the Floo. "I know she can find us easily, but..." His voice trailed off as Harry smiled and tugged him close for a fond kiss.

"There's no one I trust more to leave our children with," Harry reminded him softly. It was true. He was absolutely certain Narcissa Malfoy would die before harm befell either child. She'd laid claim to his son with a grandmotherly fierceness that overrode any lack of blood tie to Richard, even surprising Harry by learning sign language even though the baby was too young yet to truly converse.

The emphasis on 'our' earned him a beautiful smile from Draco and a less chaste kiss than he'd given. The blond fussed with his robe, making sure the lines of the deep blue silk fell properly over his white tunic and trousers. He followed it with adjusting the collar of Harry's shirt and brushing his fingers along the emerald green vest the dark-haired man wore beneath matching green robes. "Let's go then."

Harry chuckled as he preceded his fiancé through the Floo, arriving in the popular Diagon Alley restaurant and waiting to offer his hand to Draco when he emerged. He'd not been all that thrilled that the group wanted to have dinner at such a popular hotspot for the younger wizarding population, but the women of the group had insisted that Rio was the best place to celebrate. At least the food would be a new experience, since the place specialized in Brazilian food.

Draco immediately began scanning the tables, before leading Harry to the young witch acting as hostess and telling her they were joining the Hogwarts table. She did a double take as she recognized the couple before her, but quickly remembered her job when the blond arched an elegant eyebrow at her.

As they followed the girl to the table where their friends and colleagues were already gathered, Harry flashed Draco a grin. "You have to teach me how you do that. Imagine if we did it in concert to everyone who gave us that startled look."

The blond laughed softly. "A few of them might faint dead away, you know."

There had been surprisingly little opposition from others when they'd begun appearing in public together after the understated announcement of their engagement in the newspapers. Most reactions were much like the girls', or sometimes akin to what Harry had seen on Muggle entertainment shows about fan reactions to movie stars. He'd been relieved that the ten years he'd been gone had allowed much of the British wizarding population's fascination with him to fade, and the Malfoys' mostly restored reputation meant that it was viewed merely as a pending alliance of families common to the wizarding world.

They took their seats as the others greeted them. Harry was happy to be amidst this group of friends. Being at Hogwarts had allowed him to happily enjoy the renewing friendships with his old friends, as well as making new ones with those spouses who he'd not known before. He ended up seated next to Millicent Bulstrode-Weasley and smiled brightly at the stout witch.

"Bit loud in here tonight. You'd almost think that everyone's out celebrating end of term," she commented.

"Downside of end of term falling on a Friday, I suppose."

She nodded. "But I have to admit it's good to be surrounded by a noisy crowd mostly our own age instead of having to be on the lookout for students' mischief amidst their noise."

Harry snorted. "Like they try any mischief with you within sight." Millicent's reputation among students nearly put Severus' to shame, although she was known for a strict sort of fairness that reminded Harry of the retired Minerva McGonagall.

"You'd be surprised what I come across and just wait until young Richard is the same age as my Constantine. No respect for my fearsome professorial reputation at all from that young one."

That caused her husband, seated to her left, to break out into laughter and join the conversation. "You expected anything else from a Weasley son, dear?" Charlie asked.

Harry's laughter at Millicent's mock despair drew Draco out of the conversation he was having with Hermione, seated to his right. When the joke was explained, he patted the witch's hand and winked at her. "See, Millicent, that's why Hermione's considered the brightest witch of our age. She was smart enough not to take on the Weasley bloodline."

Everyone at the table now laughed. Half the table was a Weasley couple, although only Percy was a professor rather than a spouse.

Ron grinned. "Well, she proved herself the bravest witch of our age. She did take on the Longbottom bloodline, after all." He yelped as Hermione's Stinging Hex landed, but laughed as his wife congratulated Hermione on her aim.

The interaction of the women made Harry smile. He'd worried at first when he returned that there would be at best coolness between Orla and Hermione, considering she'd dated Ron for three years. But it seemed the witches had an easy friendship between them, one he figured came from being completely content in their choice of marriage partners. Neville certainly held nothing but warm friendship for Ron, but Harry had expected that. Orla, being a younger Ravenclaw, had been an unknown for him.

As Hermione turned her attention to him, Harry wasn't entirely sure he liked the teasing glint in her eyes. "As challenging as Weasley or Longbottom bloodlines might be to parent, who do we sympathize with you two?" she asked, causing the rest of the table to begin laughing again. "Honestly, Malfoy versus Potter? The world's only safe because you can't actually combine your genetics!"

While Harry laughed, he realized Draco hadn't. Hermione came to the same realization and instantly sobered to apologize if she'd offended the blond.

Draco gave her a reassuring smile, but it held none of its usual brilliance. "I know blood doesn't matter to us as parents, but it feels so strange, to know we'll need some stranger's help anytime we want children," he explained, voice soft enough that those on the opposite side of the table had to strain to hear.

"Why do you have to choose a stranger?"

Harry almost smiled. Luna's voice hadn't lost its dreamy tones even in an adulthood that included marriage to Viktor Krum, four children of her own, and control of Hogwarts' version of a primary school.

"Well, that's how this surrogate thing works, right?" Draco frowned, glancing between Harry and Hermione for confirmation.

"Depends really," Harry said. "Sometimes it's a family member, like Jamie did for Jessie and I, or a close friend."

Draco shrugged. "Neither of us have a sibling like Jamie to help." He startled as Hermione swatted his arm indignantly.

"It might not be by blood, Draco, but Harry does have siblings, and I for one would be happy to help out."

That earned her stunned looks from both Harry and Draco, and Harry's gaze went quickly to Neville, who only smiled serenely before speaking. "Hermione and I discussed it the day we realized you two were serious," he explained. "And when you're ready for more children, we thought it'd be so much better if you knew absolutely everything about the surrogate mother."

"It isn't just them," Ron said, blue eyes serious. "We've all discussed it as couples, you know." Orla nodded, and Harry was startled to see the other couples also nodding in assent, even Percy's wife Patricia, who rarely spoke to him unless spoken to.

Draco's attention seemed drawn to Luna, who'd started this revelation off with her sweetly voiced question. "Even you, Luna?" he asked softly.

Viktor spoke before his wife could, covering her small hand with his own large one and smiling. "Surely you know by now that my love considers Harry her brother in heart." His accent was barely noticeable after a decade spent in Great Britain at Luna's side.

Luna's focus on Draco was intent. "I've four wonderful children already," she said. "I know Harry's like me, wanting a large family because he grew up an only child. I'd carry a dozen children for you two if you needed me to."

Harry found his voice at last. Hermione and Luna offering wasn't that surprising, all things considered, but the other women and their Weasley spouses seemed equally confident of the offer being made. "I don't think we'd ask for a dozen," he managed, feeling Draco's fingers tighten around his hand in search of comfort and reassurance.

Luna hummed happily. "Just think, Draco. I look so much like you in coloring that any child I had would fit right in with Allie and Richard."

All the Slytherin managed was a quiet thank you, his gaze seeking his menu as he swallowed hard. Harry tugged his fingers free to put his arm around the blond's shoulders instead, happy when the other man leaned into him.

Harry met the gaze of each couple, finally nodding. "When we're ready, we'll sort things out then." His chest felt constricted with emotion and warmth at the sheer amount of love he saw in everyone's gazes. It made him wonder how he'd managed to stay away so long, and he spared a moment's wish that he'd brought Jessie home to know these people who all loved him so unquestioningly. It passed, as he realized his late wife would be overjoyed to know he'd come home and found Draco.

"So it's true, Malfoy," a rude voice cut into the quiet sense of companionship encircling the table.

Feeling Draco stiffen under his arm, Harry looked up to see two couples hovering. He recognized Goyle easily, as the man hadn't changed much in full adulthood, but the bulky man and the woman at his side hadn't been the speaker. That woman looked familiar, in the way he knew meant she was a classmate he'd forgotten, and the man with her all but hid behind her as they became the focus of twelve intent sets of eyes.

"If you're referring to the fact that you can read and know Harry and I are engaged, Daphne, then yes, it's true." Draco's voice was cool, dismissive, and so utterly Malfoy that Harry had to smile.

She'd have been pretty if not for the sneer that twisted her features, Harry thought, and he steeled himself for what he expected to follow. Homophobia didn't normally plague the wizarding world the way it did the Muggle, but it still existed, and Harry knew that look unfortunately well.

"And your father consented to this?" she continued. "After all he's done to restore your family and now you're a shirt-lifter who won't even provide the family an heir?"

"Funny that you speak of heirs," Draco replied, still cool and dismissive. Harry was proud he didn't seem to be letting his former housemate's disgust affect him. "You don't seem to have any, but then again, marrying your own cousin tends to make such things difficult at best."

Fury contorted the woman's features. "I have an heir, you bastard."

"Ah, yes. Astoria does have children now, doesn't she." Draco turned as if to explain to Harry. "The Greengrasses do allow for a female head of family, but rumor has it that Nigel Greengrass intends to name his younger daughter head of family when he dies, since she married a Muggleborn and has two sons by him."

Harry addressed the woman at last, his voice near-arctic in its chill. "You claim an heir you didn't birth, yet malign Draco that he'll do similar?"

Her timid husband was tugging almost desperately at Daphne's arm, but it was another who succeeded in deflecting the woman at last. "Just because you failed in your bid to become a Malfoy doesn't mean you should be attacking Draco now." The quiet words in the deep baritone voice drew Harry's attention to Goyle, whom he'd forgotten when the confrontation had begun.

The unexpected input caused Daphne to lose whatever reply she'd been readying for Harry, and with a strangled noise, she stalked off, her husband trailing at her heels after an apologetic look to the group.

As soon as she was out of sight, Harry felt Draco relax against him, and the blond's attention turned to his childhood friend. "Thank you, Greg. I didn't know you were back in the country."

The large man shrugged, a slow smile lighting his features. "Eileithyia thought the kids should learn more about where their father's from." He drew his wife forward, allowing her to be introduced to everyone and accepting the invitation to join them. The pretty Greek woman was drawn into conversation with Hermione as Goyle settled next to his friend and studied Harry closely before obviously finding whatever he was looking for and nodding in approval.

"Will you be staying long?" Draco asked, all coldness melted away as he smiled at the bulky man.

"Depends. Wasn't sure how welcome I'd be back here. Not something I wanted my children exposed to, having to live with the mistakes I made." He made the sort of unconscious gesture to his left forearm Harry was used to seeing from redeemed Death Eaters. "But Eileithyia and I would prefer to send the kids to Hogwarts instead of the school she attended in Greece. She likes the prestige of it."

Draco's attention had also been drawn to the gesture Goyle had made at his forearm, and after a glance at Harry, who nodded, he drew back the sleeve of his robe and began unbuttoning his shirt cuff. They both watched Goyle closely as the blond revealed unmarked pale skin.

"How?" The question held so much pure hope that Harry's heart lurched in response. He'd made the offer to Lucius and Severus, who had both refused to have their Mark removed, but he'd not thought of the others like Draco who'd had to choose between death or the Mark when they were barely out of childhood.

"Harry took it away using a spell he learned in America."

Goyle looked to Harry, startled, and Harry smiled and drew his wand, making the offer obvious. The man's fingers were clumsy as he attempted to unfasten his shirt cuff, causing Draco to bat them away and finish the job. The faded silvery mark was more obvious on his darker skin than it had been against Draco's paleness, and Harry drew on his power as he spoke the spell, his wand tracing the ugly Mark. As it faded, the other man gasped, taking deep, shuddering breaths that caused his wife to place a hand at his back in concern.

The table was quiet as the large man got his emotions under control, his fingers tracing the clear skin of his forearm in awe. "It's gone. Really, truly gone." When he met Harry's gaze this time, his dark eyes were bright with unshed tears. "There was always a taint left, even on my magic," he admitted.

Harry smiled sadly. "I know, Goyle. I felt how deeply it reached when I took Draco's away."

"Greg."

"What?"

"My friends call me Greg."

Harry's smile brightened. He knew Draco had missed his friend, who'd persistently stayed abroad much like Harry had, avoiding reminders of the war. Maybe now the man would come back home. "Greg, then."

The waitress came then, and in sorting out orders, any further serious conversation was lost, but Harry couldn't help realizing that tonight's dinner to celebrate the end of term had turned into something so much more. The thought made him warm to the core.