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# All Problems Solved (part 1)

**Title:** All Problems Solved

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**Summary:** The puzzle is complete and the doorway open once more. With his memory curiously and painfully blank, Draco must find the missing Boy-Who-Lived... because if his mistakes catch up with him, they will tear his soul apart.

**Author's Note:** Absolutely nothing to do with canon after fifth-year; so some people are alive and others are dead depending on *my* whim alone.

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*Wherever there is hate, violence and depravity - a door will always be found.*

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*April 13th, 2007*

*St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries*

Draco Malfoy returned to consciousness with remarkable speed and alacrity. Of course, this probably had something to do with the fact that pain, comparable to the Cruciatus Curse, was lancing its way through his skull.

"Sonuvabitch!" he swore, reaching up to clutch his throbbing head with both hands. He knew it was ill-befitting someone of his station to use such vulgarities, but right now he was in too much pain to give a damn.

"Ah, awake at last, I see. How... delightful."

Wincing from the pain induced by both the sharp tone as well as the raw malice lacing the words, Draco looked to one side to find the elegant features of Ginny Longbottom glaring at him with barely restrained hatred. Her normally soft brown eyes were cold, hard and utterly unsympathetic to his current discomfort.

"Weaslette," Draco managed, though his drawl was forced. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I work here, Malfoy," snapped the girl, spitting Draco's name as if it were a vile curse.

Draco looked up in surprise, the motion causing a stab of pain in the back of his head. Examining the room, he found that he was not in Malfoy Manor, as he had expected. From the look of things, he realized that he was in fact in one of the private rooms at St. Mungo's.

"How did I get here?" asked Draco, more to himself than to Ginny.

"Oh, I'm sure you remember," Ginny snarled, standing up from where she had been seated at Draco's bedside. Simply watching such a rapid motion was enough to make him feel slightly queasy. Ginny gave Draco an almost vicious grin before striding out the door. "I need to let the Aurors know you're awake."

The slam of the door caused Draco's head to throb, almost as if he were in the clutches of a severe hangover. For a minute he considered that this might be the problem, but for all his efforts he could not dredge up a single memory that would explain his presence in the hospital.

Cautiously, as any sudden movement left him dizzy, Draco pushed himself up into a sitting position. Checking himself over, he found that he was wearing some of his casual work clothes. A steely grey suit, chosen because it matched his eyes, and some carefully tailored black robes thrown over it. Everything was horribly rumpled and creased, a far cry from the usual implacably groomed standard that Draco held himself to.

"Back in the land of the living, eh?"

Draco looked up, the sharp motion causing him to wince after doing so, and found that Neville Longbottom had entered the room, his wife following behind him.

"Longbottom? What are you doing here?" asked Draco groggily, his thoughts a bit muddled.

"Sorry to bother you, Mister Malfoy--"

"Don't be," interrupted Ginny, returning to Draco's side and casting several Diagnostic Charms on him. "Slimy git's got nothing to protect him this time."

--but I need to ask you some questions relating to your movements on the night of the thirteenth," continued Neville, masterfully ignoring his wife's comments.

"The thirteenth?" Draco blinked in confusion. A glance to the bedside table revealed a standard wizarding alarm clock, its many dials and faces ticking steadily. It took several seconds for him to find what he was looking for, but Draco soon had the correct date and found his confusion growing. According to the clock, it was early in the evening on the thirteenth. "Tonight? What - why - questions?"

"Yes," confirmed Neville, taking a seat in one of the room's visitor chairs. "There's a case of Missing Persons and Suspected Homicide that my partner and I are investigating, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has reason to believe that you might be involved."

"Stop blathering on like an idiot, Longbottom, and get to the point!" snapped Draco, massaging his temples.

Neville chuckled, seemingly in good humour. "Now, now, Draco, no need to be like that. After all we've been through, at Hogwarts and afterwards, you could at least be a bit more civil."

Draco ducked his head, trying to force down the pain, and grumbled softly, "After all we've been through, it's a miracle that I haven't had you and your red-haired bitch of wife killed."

"What was that, Malfoy?" snarled Ginny, her wand digging into the side of his neck. "Speak up, or we won't be able to hear you."

"I said," Draco shoved the wand aside and turned back to Neville, "Ask your bloody questions."

"When was the last time you were in Vertik Alley?" Neville promptly asked, pulling a Muggle notebook and pen from inside his Auror robes.

"Vertik Alley?" Draco tried to concentrate, but the pounding in his head was not helping, nor was it abating.

Vertik Alley was a relatively new business district that had grown out of Diagon Alley. It contained mostly Muggleborn and half-blood owned stores and was something of the antithesis to Knockturn Alley. Naturally, Draco made a point of avoiding it and the businesses therein. Unfortunately this was becoming more difficult as Vertik Alley became more and more the financial and innovative centre of Wizarding Britain.

Frustration mounting, he shrugged and temporized. "I don't know - last month?"

"I see," muttered Neville, jotting down Draco's statement.

"I don't do a lot of business in Vertik Alley," explained Draco impatiently.

Neville's eyes flashed with victory and he leaned closer. "Then could you explain why you, as well as your associates Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini, were seen there late on the night of the thirteenth?"

"What are you talking about? I wasn't anywhere near there tonight," insisted Draco.

"Then where were you, if not in Vertik Alley?" demanded Neville.

"I was..." Draco trailed off as realization sank in.

"You were...?" prompted Neville.

"I - I can't remember," said Draco, astonished.

It was true. Draco's memories were a disjointed tangle. He tried to recall where he had been before waking up here, but nothing came to him. He couldn't even recall getting out of bed that morning, getting dressed or having breakfast. It was all frighteningly blank.

"You don't remember," repeated Neville blandly.

"I can't," Draco confirmed. "I can't even remember what Keebler served for breakfast this morning."

"Keebler?" asked Neville.

"My house-elf," said Draco. "My father bought it to replace Dibly, or whatever the one Potter freed was."

"Dobby," Ginny supplied, handing Draco a phial of some thick, bubbling orange potion. "Drink this."

Taking the potion, Draco looked at it suspiciously. "What is it?"

Ginny glared at him and answered, "A nutrient potion. It should help with your dizziness."

Reluctant to accept any help from someone he considered not only beneath him, but an enemy as well, Draco gulped down the potion. The taste, as expected, was revolting and was not improved by the thick sensation as it seemed to crawl down his throat. He did, however, have to admit that it did its job. Now if only something could be done for his pounding headache.

He looked up to find himself staring at the tip of Neville's wand. He was so startled that he dropped the now empty phial, which shattered against the tiled floor.

"Relax, Draco," Neville told him. "I'm just checking for Memory Charms, or something that would explain your inability to recall recent events."

Draco disliked the idea of having someone, especially Longbottom, playing about with his mind. He disliked not knowing what was going on even more, so he agreed and nodded his consent. If he was going to talk his way out of this mess, then he would need to know how he had gotten into it in the first place.

“Nothing,” concluded Neville after casting several spells. He glanced at his wife and asked, “Has he sustained any trauma to the head recently?”

“Only if you consider his over-inflated ego traumatic,” Ginny quipped.

“Are you so sure of that?” asked Draco scathingly. “Because my head’s pounding as if it’s about to explode.”

“If only it would,” muttered Ginny wistfully. She did, however, raise her wand again and cast some more Diagnostic Spells. Once the spells were done she shook her head. “Nothing’s physically wrong with you. If you have a headache, I’d say it’s probably stress-related. Maybe a guilty conscience?”

Ignoring the insinuation, Draco focused on Neville. “Is that all?” he asked. “I’d like to go home.”

Neville shook his head and said, “I have a few more questions.”

“Fine, get on with it,” grumbled Draco.

“Do you know the whereabouts of Theodore Nott, or Blaise Zabini?”

“No.”

“When was the last time you saw either of them?”

“Last weekend,” Draco answered, though not entirely sure. “We were at Nott’s house.”

Now Neville’s eyes narrowed and his thus far amiable manner developed a slight edge. “All right, last question. When was the last time you saw or spoke to Harry Potter?”

Draco blinked at this apparent non sequitor. “Potter? What’s he got to do with anything?”

“As if you don’t know,” snarled Ginny.

“Please, Ginny,” said Neville. Ginny huffed and stormed out of the room, not bothering to close the door behind her. Neville gave Draco an apologetic shrug before resuming the interview. “Please answer the question.”

“I don’t know,” said Draco, crossing his arms and glaring at Neville. “A month ago? Two, maybe. I don’t exactly bother to fawn over the insufferable glory-hound like the rest of you do.”

“So, suffice to say that you haven’t seen Harry recently,” concluded Neville calmly.

“No, I haven’t,” ground Draco.

“All right then,” Neville flipped his notebook closed and returned it to its pocket. “You’re free to go, but I will be contacting you again for a follow up interview.”

“Fine, fine,” said Draco, waving for the other man to hurry up. Patience had never been his strongest ability, and right now Draco only wanted to be done with these seemingly endless and pointless questions.

Neville nodded and rose from his seat. He had taken only two steps towards the door before Draco remembered that he still had no idea of what was going on.

“Wait,” he called. Neville paused in the doorway. “What’s this all about?”

“Harry Potter is missing,” Neville answered dispassionately, before turning to leave. “Oh, and Draco,” Neville looked over his shoulder. “Don’t leave the country. And make sure we don’t have to look too hard to find you.”

Draco barely heard the warning, his attention entirely focused on the departed Neville’s first statement. Harry Potter was missing. Ordinarily this news would have delighted him, but it was readily apparent that the Aurors seemed to think that he was responsible. Draco did not want to take the blame if someone else had finally managed to get rid of the Golden Boy of Gryffindor and Defeater of the Dark Lord Tom Riddle.

It was also worrisome to know that someone had apparently done the seemingly impossible. Managing to capture or perhaps even kill Potter was an impressive feat. He was generally accepted as being the most powerful wizard of his generation. There was some contention as to whether or not he had equalled or even surpassed Albus Dumbledore abilities, but neither were saying anything in that regard. Even if Potter was not equal in strength to the old headmaster, he was still head and shoulders above the rest of the population.

“Mister Malfoy?”

Draco looked up from his musing to find a nondescript looking witch standing in the doorway to his room. She was wearing Healer’s robes, but did not carry herself with the assurance most fully-trained Healers did. This meant that she was most likely still an intern or apprentice.

"Yes?" he asked impatiently, annoyed at being interrupted.

"Healer Longbottom has given you a clean bill of health," she said. "You're free to check out whenever you wish."

"Thank you," said Draco, dismissing her.

A brief examination of the room revealed nothing that belonged to him. Draco had apparently been brought in with nothing but the clothes he was wearing. He chided himself for forgetting to ask what he was doing at St. Mungo's in the first place, but decided that more important concerns needed his attention before that. Namely the mysterious disappearance of Harry Potter.

A quick Grooming Charm, taught to him by his father, neatened up and pressed his robes. It would not do for a Malfoy to be seen in public looking as if he had just barely escaped being trampled by a rampant Hippogriff. A glance in the mirror to confirm his presentable appearance, Draco stepped out of the room and made his way to the lift.

The trip down to the lobby was quick, quiet and without interruption. The lobby itself, however, was a madhouse of frantic activity. The source of the disruption was a pair of Medi-wizards pulling a floating stretcher with a convulsing body on it, being escorted by a grim looking Auror.

"What's going on here?" called a Healer, one of three that pushed past Draco on their way to the stretcher.

"The Aurors found him half an hour ago," explained one of Medi-wizards.

"What's it look like?"

"Total mental disruption and breakdown of his psyche," explained the Auror. "From what we can tell, he was over exposed to the Cruciatus Curse."

"Bugger," swore the Healer.

Draco watched with little interest as the Healers set to work. He was more concerned about checking out of the hospital, not some poor, dumb fool who pissed off the wrong person. Besides, it was probably a mudblood and was only getting what he deserved.

"D'you have a name for him?"

"We couldn't find any identification," the Auror shook his head. "We're still looking through our files at the Ministry. As soon as we know, we'll contact you with the details."

Waiting impatiently in the queue to the reception desk, Draco happened to glance at the stretcher as the group hurried past, making towards the lift. His breath hitched in his throat as he recognised the slack and pale features of Colin Creevey, the young wizard that had followed Potter around like a love-struck puppy during their Hogwarts years.

The pain hit him like a Bludger to the head.

*"Dammit, you little shit," Draco snarled in frustration. "Just tell me already!"*

*Colin, his body still twitching after his last bout under the Cruciatus, whimpered and struggled weakly against the robes binding him to the chair. He was trying to curl himself into a ball, instinctively more than anything else. "I don't know anything," he sobbed. "I don't know!"*

*Draco grabbed him by the hair and forced his head up, glaring into Colin's red-shot and tear-filled eyes. "You do! You were there, in the hall with the rest of them! You saw what happened! Now tell me!"*

*"I don't know! I don't know! I don't know!"*

*"Crucio!" snarled Draco.*

*Colin howled like a wounded animal, thrashing wildly against his restraints as his nerve endings overloaded. There was a wet pop as he bit through his lower lip, blood beginning to dribble down his chin. Concerned that Colin might end up biting off his own tongue and choke on it, Draco released the curse.*

*"Tell me what Potter did to defeat the Dark Lord!" he demanded.*

*Colin was still gasping in pain and did not reply. Draco seethed and slapped the younger wizard across the face several times, snapping his head back and forth. Again he gripped him by the hair and forced him to look into his eyes.*

*"Potter lured the Dark Lord to Hogwarts and then defeated him. My friends and I weren't in the Great Hall when he did it, but you were. Tell me how he did it and I'll put you out of your misery."*

*"I dunno," Colin moaned. "I dunno, I dunno, I dunno..."*

*"Yes, you do! Crucio!"*

Draco clutched his head and dropped to his knees. With this sudden flash of reclaimed memory, his headache had blossomed into a pain to rival the curses he had used on Colin. His head, neck and shoulders seemed to throb in time to his heart beating, the pain breaking over him in waves.

A hand on his shoulder brought him out of it.

"What's wrong? Shall I get a Healer?"

Looking up, Draco found one of the Medi-wizards that had brought in Creevey. The man had his wand out and was already casting spells to see what was wrong.

"I'm - I'm alright," he managed to gasp out. "Just a migraine. The Healer said it'll pass after I get some rest."

"If you're sure," relented the Medi-wizard, helping Draco to his feet. "If it's bad enough to bring you to your knees, however, I suggest you take the Floo home. If you try Apparating like this, you'll end up Splinching yourself."

"Yeah," Draco agreed breathlessly. "I'll do that."

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### *Malfoy Manor*

Draco's return home was without fanfare. He stumbled out of the fireplace, tripped over own his feet and fell flat on his face. He hadn't been so clumsy coming through the Floo since before he started at Hogwarts. The rough landing also served to reinforce the near constant pounding of his head.

He called out for Pansy, the blonde-haired, pug-faced, shrill-voiced bitch that Draco, when he had consumed more fire-whiskey than was healthy or polite, would admit to being married to. Their marriage was one of convenience, mostly for Draco. The Parkinsons were wealthy enough and the money Pansy had brought with her had bolstered the flagging finances of the Malfoy fortune, which had suffered after Lucius' exposure as one of Riddle's inner circle.

Staggering further into the manor, Draco grimaced. Dozens of articles in the *Daily Prophet*, mostly written by the then Hermione Granger, as well as articles in the *Quibbler*, by Luna Lovegood, had destroyed the myth surrounding Lord Voldemort. No longer was he referred to as You-Know-Who, or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Instead, Voldemort had become little more than any other Dark Lord, now known by his birth name; Tom Riddle.

"Pansy!" Draco yelled again, now standing in the main hall. "Pansy!"

When no answer came, he cursed Pansy's idiotic need to be a socialite. It was either that or she had left the manor to go on another shopping trip. Resolving to punish her properly as soon as she returned, Draco stumbled up the stairs and down the corridor leading to the master bedroom.

Discarding his robes and undoing the top few buttons of his dress shirt, Draco entered the bathroom and began rummaging through the cabinets therein. He soon had a Pain Dampening Potion in hand and gulped it down without hesitation. He clutched at the counter in front of him, as a swell of dizziness overwhelmed him. By the time his vision began to return, he was feeling better than he had since waking up in St. Mungo's.

Gazing into the mirror, Draco discovered that he looked little better than death warmed over. Running a hand through his hair, he grimaced at the grimy texture he detected. Stripping down and depositing his clothes in the laundry basket, he took a quick shower, making liberal use of the soap and shampoo.

With a towel wrapped around his waist, Draco surveyed himself in the mirror again. He was looking much better, though with a hint of stubble. A quick Shaving Charm remedied that and he re-entered the bedroom. He paused, surprised to see that the robe he had thrown aside was still present. And no new clothes had been laid out for him.

"Keebler!" he snapped.

Several moments passed, but the house-elf did not appear. Cursing Pansy for taking the help with her, wherever she was, Draco walked to the closet and selected some fresh clothes to wear. He settled on some black slacks, black loafers and a midnight blue dress shirt.

Once dressed, he made his way downstairs and to the fireplace. "Nott Residence," he called out, flicking a pinch of Floo powder into the fire. The flames turned green and he stuck his head in. A short tumbling journey later, Draco was looking out at his friend's living room. "Nott? Theo? Are you there?"

"Malfoy!" exclaimed Nott, who quickly hurried into the room. "Where the bloody hell have you been?"

"St. Mungo's," replied Draco. "D'you know what's going on? Apparently Potter's gone missing."

"Yes, I heard that on the wireless," said Nott, running a hand through his unkempt hair. Draco was surprised to see that his long-time associate was looking almost as ruffled and dishevelled as he had been earlier.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Aurors," explained Nott. "They've been asking questions. Have you spoken to Blaise?"

"Not yet. Did the Aurors question him as well?"

"The both of us, yes," confirmed Nott. "You too?" Draco nodded. "Bloody hell, that's not good. They must know something; otherwise they wouldn't be bothering with all three of us. It can't be a coincidence."

“What’s there for them to find?” scoffed Draco.

The truth of the matter was that he honestly did not know if they had anything to hide. He certainly could not admit this to either Nott or Zabini, so he was hoping Nott might unwittingly give him a clue. Unfortunately, Nott was not as forthcoming as he had hoped.

“You know damned well what,” barked Nott unhappily.

“Don’t lose your cool, Theo,” warned Draco.

“Yeah, I know,” Nott sigh. He ran a worried hand through his hair again. “I’m needed at the Ministry. Apparently Potter’s wife, the mudblood, is there and asking questions she shouldn’t. I’ll talk to you later - in the meantime, speak to Blaise if you can, maybe he has something new to share.”

“Alright,” agreed Draco, preparing to pull his head back to the Manor.

“And for God’s sake, Draco,” warned Nott before he Disappeared, “don’t let anything slip!”

“How do I let slip something I don’t even remember?” asked Draco snidely after Nott had departed. With a disgruntled sigh, he ended the Floo connection.

He was reaching for another pinch of Floo powder, so that he could Floo Zabini, when someone began pounding on the front door. Draco started at the sound, surprised by its unexpectedness and alarmed that it was happening at all. Nobody should have been able to knock on the manor’s door without him knowing about it beforehand. There were wards that prevented it, stopping most visitors at the gates to the grounds.

Making sure that his wand was in hand, Draco hurried to the atrium. The pounding continued without pause and, as he got closer, Draco could make out some muffled yelling from the other side of the thick oak doors.

“Open up, Malfoy! I know you’re in there!”

Growling unhappily, Draco put away his wand and threw open the door, glaring at the intruder. “What do you, of all people, want, Weasel?!” he snarled.

Ron Weasley, dressed in his Auror robes and standing impatiently on the front step, returned Draco’s glare with an equally furious one. He shouldered his way past Draco and into the manor, deliberately pushing Draco into the wall as he did. He looked around suspiciously for a moment before rounding on Draco.

“All right, Malfoy,” he spat. “Where’s Harry?”

“How the devil should I know?” retorted Draco.

“Because you’re the one that got to him!” bellowed Ron, leaning in so close that spittle sprayed over Draco’s face. The burly redhead’s face was almost the same colour as his hair. “I know you’re the one that has him, or did something to him, so you’re going to tell me! Now!”

“I’ve done nothing wrong! You can’t touch me!” snapped Draco bitterly.

“Want to bet?” said Ron with a vicious sneer as he grabbed Draco by the front of his shirt. With his fury lending him strength, Ron heaved Draco into the air and spun him around. He slammed the smaller wizard against the wall, hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

Draco grabbed his wand, but Ron caught his wrist in an iron grip. He squeezed, increasing the pressure until the bones in Draco’s arm creaked and he released his hold on the wand, letting it clatter to the floor. Ron leaned in close, his sneer turning into a smirk. “Drawing your wand on an officer of the law? Resisting arrest?” he hissed. “Those are chargeable offences.”

“Let me go!” Draco demanded, still pressed against the wall by Ron’s one hand.

“Not until you tell me where Harry is,” countered Ron.

“Screw you, Weasley! You have no evidence I’m involved. You can’t prove anything and until you can, this is harassment! I’ll have your commission for this!”

“Empty threat, Malfoy.”

And it was. They both knew it. Ever since Lucius’ double life as a Death Eater had been revealed the Malfoys had lost almost all the influence they had ever wielded. The only punishment Draco would be able to levy against Ron would be what he could manage through official channels - and those were notoriously slow, and would probably side against him.

“I don’t know where Potter is! I don’t care where Potter is!” Draco yelled.

“Bullcrap,” said Ron simply.

“It’s the truth!”

“You hate Harry! Always have, always will,” countered Ron. “You never could keep your nose out of his business. If anyone knows anything, it’s you.”

“Dammit,” Draco struggled against Ron’s grip. “I’ve been in St. Mungo’s all day! I didn’t even learn Potter was missing until that oaf partner of yours told me!”

"You've spoken to Neville?" asked Ron suspiciously.

"And your trollop of a sister!"

On reflection that was probably not the smartest thing to say, but the words had left Draco's mouth before he could stop them. The next thing that happened was that Ron released his hold on Draco's wand arm and slammed that fist into his jaw, smashing his head back against the stone wall behind him. The headache that had gone into remission was suddenly back with a vengeance.

Draco collapsed to the floor, his head feeling as if it had just been rent in two. It was all he could do not to throw up as a deep feeling of nausea settled in his stomach. Gasping for breath and clutching his midriff, he looked up at the Auror that now towered over him. Ron's entire body was shaking with barely suppressed rage.

"You better be telling the truth, ferret," Ron threatened, "because if you're lying - I'll come for you."

The crack as Ron Apparated away was like having a hot poker rammed into his skull. Draco cursed and swore from the pain, remaining curled up on the floor for several minutes. Finally the throbbing in his head receded enough that he chanced climbing back up to his feet. He swayed unsteadily for a while, but soon regained his balance as his headache faded into the background.

"Bastard," he concluded, closing the door which Weasley had left open.

Gingerly walking to his study, Draco sank into his chair. He spent the next while cursing Ron Weasley, his birth, his family, his friends and everything else about him. He then spent some time imagining the various tortures he would have liked to subject the Auror to, each one more painful and gruesome than the last.

By the time he was done, Draco's foul mood had lifted somewhat and his attention returned to the more immediate problem. Looking out the large French windows of his study, he saw that it was still early in the evening, the twilight sky lit up in dark reds and purples.

Thinking over what he should do next; Draco absently began to clear his desk of the various sheets of parchment and portfolio that covered its polished oak surface. He was about to discard a pile of papers, when something odd caught his eye. It was a business card of some sort - something of a rarity in the wizarding world.

Separating it from the surrounding papers, Draco examined it with honest curiosity. It was clearly very old, the paper long since turned yellow with age. What was strange about the card was the fact that it was blank. No hint of an owner's name or a business logo adorned its face. Puzzled by this, Draco flipped it over and discovered three words, printed in bold copperplate on the back face.

## **ALL PROBLEMS SOLVED**

He traced over the mysterious letters with his thumb, wondering what the words meant. He could almost feel it, that he somehow knew what this was about, but his memory continued to fail him. Lost in thought, the sudden onslaught of pain, worse than before, caught Draco completely by surprise.

*Draco arrived at one of Diagon Alley's designated Apparation points with a muted crack. Making sure that nobody seemed to have noticed his arrival, he strode swiftly and purposefully towards his destination. As the entrance drew near, Draco flipped up the hood of his robe, hiding his face from view.*

*Knockturn Alley had seen better days, that much was sure. Ever since the second defeat of Tom Riddle, the dark elements that ruled the alley had fallen on hard times. While it had never been as clean and controlled as Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley was now a decaying cesspool of the dark side of the Wizarding World.*

*It took some time for Draco to get where he was going, a rundown shop in the deepest and darkest corner of the alley. He was nearly accosted twice during his journey and was forced to hex both possible assailants, before they made their move against him, as a precaution and warning to others. Once the second would-be robber had been dealt with, Draco was allowed to proceed unhindered.*

*Standing outside the store, Draco checked the business card he had received. All Problems Solved. He looked up at the dilapidated building in front of him and read the faded and nigh illegible signpost. All Problems Solved.*

*Grimacing at the abhorrent condition of his surroundings, not to mention the fetid stench, Draco drew his robes close and stepped inside. The front room was empty, save for a crudely written notice that directed him through a door to one side that opened to an unsteady looking staircase.*

*Descending the flights of stairs, almost tripping on the uneven stairs and falling to his death several times, Draco soon reached the bottom. If anything the basement below was in even worse condition than the building above. The small room the stairs lead down to had only a single door.*

*"Merlin, this had better be worth my while," Draco grumbled, looking at the grimy doorknob.*

*Wishing that he had brought his gloves with him, Draco pushed the door open and entered. In stark contrast to all he had encountered thus far, he suddenly found himself in an exceptionally clean and ordered room. Admittedly, it was completely bare, save for the counter opposite the door. The floor, walls and ceiling were devoid of any form of decoration, save a plain coat of off-white paint.*

*"Hello?" he called, seeing that he was the only person present. Cautiously, Slytherin instincts for self-preservation coming to the fore, Draco*



approached the unattended counter. "Is anyone here?"

"Yes."

Badly startled, Draco whirled about. The door leading in from the staircase swung shut with a creak, revealing the person who had spoken.

It was a wizened old man, older than any wizard Draco had ever seen. His long and meticulously combed hair was so bleached with age that it had lost all colour and had taken on a sickly pale yellow hue, rather than silver. His beard reached down to the floor and was knotted in an intricate plait. He was also so bent and hunched over that the top of his head just barely reached Draco's chest.

"What's your pleasure, sir?" asked the man, revealing a somewhat Asian accent.

"I'm Draco Malfoy," said Draco, warily stepping aside as the old man shuffled past him and into place behind the counter. Hoping his nervousness was not apparent, Draco continued, "I was told you could help me find something I've been looking for."

"And that is?"

"The power that defeated Lord Voldemort."

"Hmm," mused the old man thoughtfully, stroking his moustache.

"Well?" demanded Draco impatiently.

The old man seemed to consider for a moment, then nodded and lifted his head. Draco could not help but gasp when the old man's piercing eyes focused on him. They were dark beyond belief, like glittering pools of liquid agate, and having seen those eyes Draco could not doubt the old man's next words.

"I can see into your soul."

Draco rocked back in his seat, almost sending the heavy chair toppling over. He managed to steady it easily enough, but it was a long minute before he felt steady himself. His heart was pounding like a trip hammer in his chest and his breath was coming in desperate gasps.

Finally regaining his breath and feeling his furious pulse slow to a more normal pace, Draco stared at the business card. It was resting innocuously on the desktop where he had dropped it during his vision. For some reason, he felt a shiver of fear make its way along his spine at the sight of it.

## **ALL PROBLEMS SOLVED**

Grabbing it up with an unsteady hand and shoving it into the front pocket of his shirt, Draco rose from his chair and hurried out of his study. He threw on a set of everyday robes he found hanging in the atrium, and made his way out the manor and down the path leading to the gates. Once off the grounds, he Apparated with a crack.

-oOo-

### *Ministry of Magic*

Determined to find out what the hell was going on, Draco Apparated directly to the Ministry of Magic. He arrived in the Entrance Atrium, not far from the rebuilt Fountain of Magical Brethren. The original fountain had been destroyed over a decade ago, during a battle between Professor Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort.

Draco paused. The fountain seemed... off. It might have been the way the light fell, or perhaps his eyes were deceiving him, but there seemed something sinister about those statues right now. A dangerous glint in the eyes of the centaur, a deep hatred burning in the expression of the goblin...

Shaking himself out of his momentary daze, Draco proceeded to the check in counter.

"Wand," ordered the wizard sitting there, his attention elsewhere.

"Here," said Draco, setting his wand in front of the guard.

"Ten inches," recited the guard in a bored tone, "hawthorn and unicorn hair."

Draco had already accepted his wand back when the words penetrated. He looked down at the wand in surprise, for this was his first wand, one he had replaced shortly after graduating from Hogwarts. Since then it had been stored away in his old trunk along with the rest of his school things.

Shaking his head again, in a futile attempt to regain his focus, Draco hurried to the bank of lifts leading down to the rest of the Ministry. It was over a minute before one of the lifts opens, allowing him to board. He grit his teeth as a mindless, yet annoying tune began to play as the lift descended. Bloody Muggles and their bloody elevator music. Finally arriving at his desired floor, Draco vacated the lift as quickly as he could while maintaining a cool and collected pace.

Navigating your way the maze of corridors and offices took time, but Draco was well acquainted with the Ministry's confusing layout. Before long he was standing outside the office where one of his informants regarding all matters of importance worked. Rapping a fist on the door, Draco waited impatiently, but nobody answered.

"Can I help you, sir?" asked a passing employee.

"I'm looking for Kircher," replied Draco.

The man, who reminded Draco of the brown-nosing Weatherby Weasley, thought for a moment. Finally he shook his head and said, "Sorry, but I don't think he came in to work today."

"Blast," cursed Draco under his breath. "Do you know if Pucey or Bole are in?"

"Haven't seen them either," the man shrugged before continuing on his way.

By now Draco was suspicious. For Kircher to be absent was not worrying, but for two others of his primary sources of information to be missing... something was up. Returning to the lifts Draco travelled up one floor and attempted to find Philip Chanard.

Some discrete inquiries, made after finding this office locked as well, revealed that Chanard was likewise missing. More disconcerting than anything else was the fact that nobody was the least bit concerned that four Ministry employees had seemingly disappeared without warning overnight.

Deciding against checking the rest of his informants, which he suspected would also prove to be missing; Draco rode a lift up to the Entrance Atrium. From there he planned to go to Nott's house and speak with his friend directly, rather than over the Floo. Hopefully he would get some answers.

The lift doors slid open with a ding and Draco found himself face-to-face with his second least favourite person in the world. The bushy-haired, bossy-voiced, know-it-all; Hermione Potter.

"Malfoy," she cussed upon seeing him.

"What are you doing here, Granger?" asked Draco, preferring to call her by her maiden name. It was an attempt of his to remind her that she was still a lowly mudblood, despite her marriage into the Potter line. Sadly, the insult seemed to always go straight over her head.

"My father-in-law wants to see Auror Captain Shackbolt," replied Hermione, directing Draco's attention to the wheelchair bound figure that she was standing behind. Sirius Black, godfather to Harry Potter, glared up at Draco from his seat.

Black had somehow managed to escape from whatever lay beyond the veil, doing so only hours after Voldemort's final defeat. His time on the other side had left its mark on him, however, leaving him scarred, crippled and incapable of proper speech. Testimony from several high-level wizards, mainly Dumbledore and Potter, had eventually secured the man a pardon for his supposed crimes.

Since then Black had re-entered the wizarding world to a limited degree, preferring to stay out of the public eye, much like his godson. As far as anyone knew, he was living with his old friend Remus Lupin and his wife, spending his days working as a consultant for Weasley's Wizard Wheezes.

"Well," said Draco, pushing past the two, "enjoy your *talk* with the Aurors."

Hermione, however, caught him by the arm before he could leave. She glared hatefully at him and for a moment Draco thought she was going to slap him, like she had in their third-year.

"Are you so willing to open Pandora's Box that you'd sell your soul?" she demanded.

"What are you talking about?" he countered, trying to pull free.

"Don't bother lying, Malfoy," Hermione told him with a huff. "Everyone knows how much you hate Harry, so don't think you can pretend you're not behind all this."

"I haven't had anything to do with your precious Potter's disappearance, Granger!" snapped Malfoy, finally jerking his arm from her grasp. He met her furious glare with a sneered, "If you're that worried about him, then go out and look for him instead of wheeling cripples to and fro!"

Sirius might have lost the ability to walk, but his arms were in much better working condition. Which is how the blow he landed to Draco's gut caused the blonde wizard to double over, exposing him to the sharp uppercut that followed through.

"You bastard, Malfoy," snarled Hermione, giving Draco a sharp kick to the ribs as she wheeled Sirius into the patiently waiting lift. "Mark my words, if you've mussed a single hair on Harry's head, I'll make sure you get what's coming to you - just like your father did."

Sirius' harsh wheeze of agreement was cut off as the lift doors closed with a ding, leaving Draco in an undignified heap sprawled across the Atrium floor. None of those present bothered to help him to his feet.

-oOo-

### *Nott Residence*

Draco was not enjoying what he could remember of today. Although, he had to admit, it was mostly his fault that Potter's godfather had floored him. He should not have provoked Granger so crudely, it was ill-befitting a Malfoy. Especially when the situation was as problematic as Draco was currently encountering.

After picking himself up, and silently vowing vengeance against everyone in the Atrium who had stood back to gawk at him, Draco Apparated to Nott's house in Bristol. He arrived feeling more than a little woozy, though he was not sure if this was because of Black's assault, or the resurgence of his earlier headache. Knocking on the door, Draco leaned heavily against the doorframe and waited.

"Malfoy, what are you doing here?" asked Nott, opening the door. His expression shifted as he took in Draco's current condition. "You look terrible, what happened?"

"Headache," said Draco succinctly.

"I've had my share of headaches before," said Nott, leading Draco inside. "But I don't think I ever looked as wretched as you do right now."

"Bad headache," Draco elaborated as he trudged into the living room.

"If you feel half as bad as you look, I'm amazed you're still standing," observed Nott. He crossed the room to a liquor cabinet and poured a desperate measure of brandy into the first glass he found.

"Had it since I woke up in St. Mungo's," explained Draco, sinking on the couch in front of the fire. "I took a Pain Dampening Potion, but it doesn't seem to be helping any more."

"Have you been Apparating a lot?" asked Nott, handing him the brandy.

"Just to the Ministry, then here," said Draco after taking a large gulp of his drink.

"That might be it," said Nott. "Apparating can disrupt most potions."

"Bugger," swore Draco, taking another gulp of brandy.

"Well, you're looking better now," observed Nott, dropping into a nearby armchair. "The brandy's put some colour back in your cheeks. Are you feeling well enough to talk, or d'you need more rest?"

Draco waved for him to continue. "Let's get on with it."

Nott shifted about until he was comfortable and then asked, "What were you doing at the Ministry?"

"I wanted to talk to my informants. Find out what's going on with Potter," answered Draco.

"And?" prompted Nott, leaning forward eagerly. "What did you find out?"

"I found out that every person I usually go to for information is missing," stated Draco, finishing the brandy in one swallow to emphasis his point.

"What?"

"None of them came in to work today," Draco elaborated.

"Crap," swore Nott.

"What about you?" asked Draco. "You said you were going into the Ministry as well."

"Yeah, we must've just missed each other," Nott nodded in agreement. He then heaved a deep sigh and nervously ran a hand through his hair.

"Unfortunately, my story is almost exactly the same as yours. Everyone I wanted to talk to hadn't come in, or weren't available. Hell, the only familiar faces I saw were the mudblood and Black."

"You saw them too?" asked Draco.

"Yeah," confirmed Nott. "They were just arriving when I left."

"What?"

"Apparently Black wanted to talk to Shacklebolt about something," Nott shrugged.

Draco was about to point out that this was exactly the same thing that had happened to him, but a sudden stab of skull splitting pain struck his nerves at that very moment. He gasped out in agony and toppled from his seat on the couch, falling to the floor.

"Malfoy? Bloody hell!" cursed Nott, struggling to lift Draco back onto the couch. Draco tried to help, but his body was refusing to cooperate with him.

"It's... getting worse," he managed to choke out as Nott lay him down.

"I'll get you some potions," promised Nott. After making sure that his guest was not about to roll over and fall to the floor again, Nott left the room in search of something to help Draco's pain.

Draco lay limply on the couch, his breathe coming in rapid and shallow gasps. The sharp edge of the pain had receded, but his head continued to pound angrily. Trying to take his mind off it, he looked out the nearby window in the hope that the view of Nott's garden would soothe him or some such nonsense.

He frowned slightly at the sight of the twilight sky, like a dark purple and burgundy veil hanging above the trees and hedges. It seemed odd that the sky was not yet dark and star filled, as he had easily spent a good hour running around the Ministry before coming here. Surely a night sky should have settled over the world by now.

Draco turned away from his contemplation of Nott's garden, the mid-morning winter sun bothering his eyes. Focusing on the warmly lit room he was sitting in, he returned his attention to his companions.

"I'm telling you, the Wizarding World is going to Hell in a hand basket," Nott was saying. "It's been a decade since the Dark Lord fell and most decent purebloods have little to no power to their names anymore. We don't have the control, or even the respect we deserve - all because our parents made the mistake of openly supporting Riddle. The mudbloods act as though we were the ones responsible, but why should we suffer for it? Aren't they ever going to forget?"

"No," replied Zabini calmly, sipping his tea. "And I doubt they'll forgive either."

"But it's an outrage!" bellowed Nott, slamming a fist against his armrest.

"Don't cry over split milk, Theodore," chided Draco as he entered the conversation.

"What then?" grumbled Nott.

"If we're going to bring the Ministry to heel, and elevate the old pureblood families back to their proper status, then we need to do something about Potter," said Draco, helping himself to a chocolate dipped biscuit.

"Bah!" scoffed Nott, throwing up his arms. "With you, Malfoy, everything's about Potter, Potter, bloody Potter!"

"It's a valid point though," noted Zabini, leaning back and crossing his legs at the ankles. "Potter is, after all, the person most responsible for our families' fall from grace. He orchestrated the trap that destroyed Voldemort and all of his most loyal supporters."

"How'd he do that, anyway?" asked a surly Nott. "Even now, nearly ten years after the fact, nobody knows exactly how the bloody yob managed it. Riddle, and over two dozen Death Eaters, gone in a single night."

"Daphne thinks it's some sort of memory modification at work," said Zabini.

"Memory Charms?" asked Draco.

"Almost every student at Hogwarts, aside from ourselves, was in the Great Hall when Potter did... whatever it was," explained Zabini. He sipped his tea and continued, "That's several hundred witnesses, yet none of them have said a word about what happened that night."

"But what about the Ministry," persisted Draco. "Surely Potter couldn't have managed to keep them from finding out. They have the authority to demand an explanation from him - especially as no bodies were ever recovered."

"Officially the Ministry's as in the dark as everyone else," supplied Nott, much calmer than before. "What few reports I have gotten my hands on don't say much."

"Well, what do they say?" prompted Zabini.

Nott settled back, as if in preparation to tell a story. "Apparently," he began, "Potter managed to create some sort of magical artefact--"

Zabini immediately interrupted, "We're well aware of his business dealings, Theo. The man's making a fortune selling those APPTs of his."

"All Purpose Potter Tools," recited Draco scornfully. "Gods above, he gets more conceited every year."

"Yes, yes," snapped Nott impatiently. "The point is; Potter created a class five dark magic artefact--" both Draco and Zabini gasped at this, "--and used it to kill the Dark Lord. Everything he's done with APPT is just extensions of what he did back then."

"Are you saying that Potter, Mister Goody-Two-Shoes, the Golden-boy of Gryffindor, actually managed to make something that classifies as the most dangerous kind of a Dark Arts object?" asked Draco incredulously.

"Exactly," said Nott succinctly.

"Something like one of those constructs he sells?" asked Zabini.

"Yes," confirmed Nott. "The report didn't go into detail, but it said something about it releasing 'a great power' which was what destroyed Riddle and the others. Personally, I think the examiners were too afraid of the damned thing to make a proper analysis."

"Did the Ministry impound this artefact?" asked Draco, rising from his seat and beginning to pace.

"No, not from what I know," said Nott with a shake of his head. "All the reports say that it was 'left in the hands of its creator, for proper handling and safe-keeping'."

"Then the first thing we need to do," concluded Blaise, "is find out everything we can about this object."

*"And then we take it for ourselves," finished Draco.*

Draco blinked rapidly and looked around in confusion, the real world fading back into being as the memory ended. A glance out the window showed a still vibrant red and purple sky, indicating that not much time had passed.

Oddly enough, Draco found that he was feeling much more like himself now that the vision had passed. This was both worrisome and reassuring. The continual headaches, which cumulated in what seemed to be repressed memories, pointed to a Memory Charm of some sort - as Neville Longbottom had suspected. That Draco's mind appeared to be fighting against the charm was a good thing, but it was still disturbing to think someone had succeeded in casting such a spell on him.

Several minutes passed in quiet relaxation, Draco enjoying this momentary respite. He began to worry, however, as he had yet to hear anything from Nott. His friend's home was larger than most, but it should not be taking so long to find some potions and return with them.

"Nott?" he called. After waiting another minute, he tried again, louder this time. "Theo?"

It was now readily apparent that something must have happened to Nott between the time he had left for the potions and Draco's vision. Rolling off the couch and making sure his wand, old as it was, was held at the ready, Draco exited the living room and began to search the house.

It did not take long to determine that Nott was missing. Draco's only conclusion was that someone must have abducted his friend. It stood to reason that, had Nott left willingly, he would have at least informed Draco that he was doing so, even if he had been in a hurry.

Deciding not to waste more time on a fruitless search, Draco made his way to the master bathroom. Turning out the various cabinets and cupboards revealed several potions, half a dozen of which were what Draco was looking for. Aware that he might not have an opportunity like this again in the near future, he quickly drank one of the potions and pocketed the others - just in case.

With the pain now muted to the point that he almost felt normal, Draco moved to Nott's study. There he hoped to find some clue as to what was going on. He now knew that he and his two associates had planned to steal whatever it was that Potter had used to defeat the Dark Lord. The question now was; had they succeeded?

A search of Nott's oversized teak desk revealed nothing of interest, but Draco knew that no true Slytherin would leave any important documents in such an assessable place. It took the better part of half an hour, but he eventually located the hidden cubby-hole where Nott stored the true fruits of his labours at the Ministry.

Sifting through various account portfolios and other minutiae that were of no concern, Draco eventually found what he was looking for. Nott had apparently been quite busy since whenever he, Zabini and Draco had decided upon their scheme. There were nearly a dozen reports, testimonies and statements concerning Potter's little secret.

It was referred to as simply; *Dark Arts Artefact #1138* . No other name or title was given.

No measurements were noted, save for a comment that the object's apparent weight seemed to fluctuate and gave a different result each time it was examined. The materials used to construct it were many and varied, including woods, metals, stones and even precious gems. These alone had an estimated value, not taking into account the item's unique characteristics, of nearly four hundred Galleons.

While no pictures were available, in fact not even a written description was given, there was indication that the artefact could be configured to perform different tasks. How this was possible was a mystery in of itself, as according to one report, the artefact had a perfectly null magical reading. If it weren't for the fact that it was known to be the cause of Voldemort's defeat, the Department of Mysteries would have considered it to be a purely Muggle item.

There was speculation in one file that former Minister Cornelius Fudge and his Under-Secretary Dolores Umbridge had also been victims of the object's power, apparently having sought to use it themselves. Careful investigation revealed that Umbridge had quietly sequestered the item in question some weeks before she and Fudge disappeared. As with Voldemort and his Death Eaters, no bodies were ever found.

Underneath all this Draco also found what looked like architectural plans of some sort. He was so surprised, upon closer inspection, that he dropped most of the papers he was holding. These were the blueprints to the All Purpose Potter Tools building, situated at number seventeen Vertik Alley.

Draco nodded to himself in understanding. Somehow Nott had gotten his hands on the plans to where Potter kept his little trinket, which explained why Neville Longbottom had asked if Draco had been in Vertik Alley earlier. In all likelihood he had been, even if he could not remember being there. But what had gone wrong...?

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### *Zabini Penthouse*

Rather than risk disrupting that last Pain Relief Potion he had taken, Draco decided to Floo to Zabini's home. There he hoped to find Blaise, the only other one of his co-conspirators he was aware of. With all of his Ministry informants missing, and now Nott as well, Draco needed to get to whoever was left before they too disappeared.

"Zabini? Zabini, are you here? Blaise?"

No reply came to his query, which gave Draco pause. While not yet fully night time the twilight was dark enough to warrant turning the lights on. Which someone had already done. The lights in the Zabini drawing room were all on, and the same seemed true for the rest of the dwelling. Yet

nobody else was present.

"Where the devil is everyone?" he angrily asked himself.

"Behind you perhaps?" suggested a soft voice behind him.

Draco was physically and emotionally exhausted. Since waking up in St. Mungo's this had steadily become the longest day he had ever had to live through - and he couldn't even remember most of it. Regardless of this, his exhaustion fled him with all the swiftness of mist evaporating in front of a blast furnace. The startled leap that followed was quite impressive.

After prying himself off and down from the figurative ceiling, Draco scowled fiercely at the person who had surprised him so much.

"Bloody hell, woman! Are you trying to scare me to death?!" he snarled.

Daphne Zabini, formerly of the Greengrass household, was tall for a witch and almost the same height as Draco. Her hair just reached her shoulders and was a dark chestnut colour. Her large brown eyes, remarkably soft in appearance for a Slytherin, seemed to find amusement in Draco's current predicament.

"You seemed to be doing well enough without my help, Draco," she purred with a bit of a smirk.

"Dammit, Daphne," Draco cursed, "I could've hexed you!"

"Without using your wand?" teased Daphne, pointing out that Draco's wand was indeed not in his hand, but rather one of his robe's pockets.

"I don't have time for games," he growled, pushing past her and going back into the drawing room. "Where's that under-achieving husband of yours? I need to speak with him."

"Blaise went out earlier this evening," Daphne informed him lightly. "He said something about some ancient book that was important for solving a puzzle he's been trying to get around."

"D'you know where he is?" asked Draco. "Or when he'll be back?"

"Not a clue, but he said it could be days," answered Daphne smugly. She came to stand directly behind him and snaking her arms around his chest, pulling open his robes and deftly undoing his shirt's buttons as she nipped playfully at his neck.

Draco had never much cared for that part of his wedding vows concerning fidelity, nor for that matter did Daphne. Their five-year long affair had nothing to do with love and everything to do with sex, something neither of them had any desire to change.

Keeping knowledge of these trysts away from Pansy had been easy, but Blaise required more careful handling. As both of them had voracious appetites it meant a great deal of work went into planning these meetings and very few of their encounters were ever spontaneous. Such occasions were, naturally, taken advantage of to the fullest.

Right now, however, sex was the last thing on Draco's mind.

"Not now, Daphne," growled Draco, pulling free from her embrace. "I have far more important things to deal with than your damned insatiable libido."

"And what things might those be?" asked Daphne.

"Theo's missing, Blaise is missing, even bloody perfect Potter's missing!" snapped Draco as he waved his hands about to express his irritation. "And the bloody Aurors think I'm the one responsible for it all!"

"Are you?"

"Of course I'm not!"

"Are you sure about that?"

Draco glared at her and snarled, "I'm bloody sure! If I'd managed to finally get rid of Potter, I don't think I'd forget about it so easily!"

"I think you'd be surprised," said Daphne, following after him. She pushed against his chest and sent him toppling into the lounge chair Blaise preferred to sit at. "Besides which, we should always seize advantage of every opportunity presented to us - like the good Slytherins we are."

"Dammit woman--" Draco tried push himself up, but Daphne quickly straddled his lap and trapped him in place beneath her. She stopped his protests by the simple method of occupying his mouth with something other than talk. Breaking the kiss, feeling a bit breathless and light-headed, he murmured, "Daphne..."

"Shhhh," Daphne shushed, pressing a finger to his lips. "No talking, lover."

"I don't have time for this," grumbled Draco and grabbed her by the hips. He wanted to remove her from her place in his lap, but she began to grind her pelvis against him.

"We have all the time we want," countered Daphne, gasping as she pressed against him. Her movements were beginning to affect him, despite his lack of desire.

Sliding his hands around her hips to cup her rear, Draco let his head drop back in resignation. Perhaps it was for the best, he decided. Considering all the stress he had been under since finding himself in this mess, an hour or two spent finding some relief could not hurt.

Sensing his surrender to her advances, Daphne grinned down at him in triumph before leaning down to kiss him ardently. Draco squeezed her rump in encouragement before sliding his hands up and under her blouse to caress her back. Daphne moaned against his lips and began to blindly fumble at the fastenings to his shirt. Working quickly to divest each other of their clothes, the pair was soon writhing naked in the chair.

Sex with Daphne was always more about passion than love. This was probably why Draco could barely stomach his wife, who utterly adored him but was almost entirely submissive in bed. Draco preferred partners that could match him passion for passion. Right now, that same passion was exactly what Draco needed after what he had been through. His stress, and even his headache, was consumed in the fires of Daphne's sex as she sank down onto his lap.

The pleasure was blissful, especially after the pain he had suffered over the course of the day, and he soon found himself forgetting the troubles that plagued him. His hands latched onto her bum and he gripped tightly as their groins beat rhythmically against each other. Daphne sat up slightly, causing Draco to pierce deep into her, and dangled her generously endowed breasts at just the right height for him to suckle on her nipples.

"Yes, Draco, yes," she encouraged him, her hands clutching his shoulder to help support her weight.

"Can't last much longer," gasped Draco, sweat soaking his brow.

Almost immediately after saying this, Daphne convulsed in a wild orgasm that he was helpless to resist. His own climax washed over him, but not as he expected. The pleasure grew to untold levels and continued to do so until that selfsame pleasure transformed into pain. It was an unbearable agony that swept through Draco's body, burning so coldly that the nerves in its wake were left blistered and raw.

Every muscle in Draco's body was drawn taut. He could not move, not even to draw a breath. His eyes were unable to blink; affording him a clear view of Daphne's flushed face, twisted in ecstasy. A scream reached his ears, muffled as if coming from a great distance. It was not Daphne's cries of bliss, but rather his own shriek of agony. Draco's world slowly dissolved into a field of pure white.

Mercifully, he finally passed out.

-oOo-

### *St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries*

Draco returned to consciousness with the same formidable speed and alacrity he had demonstrated upon first waking up in St. Mungo's. Of course, this fact meant very little to him at the moment, as his skull was once again feeling in danger of splitting apart like an over-ripe pumpkin.

"Sonuvabitch!" he ground out, clenching his jaw and grinding his teeth together in an attempt to stop himself from crying out again the waves of pain now assaulting him.

"Hospitalized twice in one night, even Harry never managed that Malfoy."

Cracking his eyes open, Draco glared up at Ginny Longbottom's unsympathetic face. She was standing alongside his bed and returned his annoyed glare with undisguised belligerence. A quick examination of the room revealed that Draco was indeed back at St. Mungo's, though once again he had no idea how that had come to be.

"You might not be the smartest wizard Hogwarts ever turned out, Malfoy," observed Ginny as she cast Diagnostic Spells on his reclining form, "but even you should know better than to try and Apparate while intoxicated."

"Intoxi - are you saying I was *drunk*?" demanded Draco incredulously.

"Like a Muggle lord," Ginny confirmed with some relish. "You managed to Splinch yourself - left your bottom half at the Ministry and the rest of you went to your manor. It's only luck that you didn't die in the process. Bad luck."

"For a Healer, your concern for your patients is exceptional," sneered Draco sarcastically, trying to push himself up.

"Uh uh," Ginny pressed one hand against his chest and held him down with perhaps undue force. "Your lower bits have been reattached for less than half an hour, so you shouldn't move too much. As for my bedside manner; it has been remarked on and received rather high praise."

"Only by masochists," retorted Draco.

"Don't blame me if you bring out my sadistic streak, Malfoy," said Ginny, finishing the last of her spells. "After all, you're good at making people mad. We all go a little mad sometimes, don't we?"

"The only thing mad about this situation is this situation," muttered Draco unhappily, once again trying to rise.

Seeing how stubborn he was being, this time Ginny did nothing to restrain him. Instead she searched through the small bag most Healers used and help up a pair of sickly looking potions. "Take these two," she handed them to him, "and if you're not dead come morning, then don't bother calling."

Draco eyed the potions he now held with some scepticism. From the way Ginny was treating him, he would not have put it past her to try and poison him instead of heal him, Healer's Oath or not. If she had been a Slytherin then nothing would have been enough to convince him to down the potions, but she was a Gryffindor like the rest of her overlarge family.

"Trust me," he told her, uncorking the first phial and knocking it back. The taste was repugnant and left him gagging before he could finish speaking. "Even if I was at death's door, I wouldn't call *you* for help."

"Fine by me," said Ginny as she packed her things. "Because you've already had two close calls and the third time's usually the charm... which in your case, everyone will find to be a good thing."

"Bitch," grumbled Draco after she left the room. He sat contemplating the second potion. It was an electric blue in colour, shot through with veins of putrid green. Deciding that he needed all the help he could get, all things considered, he gulped down the potion and tried to ignore how his stomach protested over it.

It was at least an hour after taking the potions before Draco felt well enough to try his legs. He was a bit unsteady on his feet, but soon regained his balance. A quick Grooming Charm straightened and pressed his rumpled clothes, and then he followed in Ginny's footsteps.

He had never liked St. Mungo's, even though he very seldom had cause to visit. He would much rather have been treated by a private Healer, such as his father had hired during Draco's youth. Sadly the Malfoy fortune was not what it had been and could not afford to keep a Healer on permanent retainer.

Draco had almost reached the lifts when a familiar face caught his eye. Colin Creevey was lying limply on a wheeled bed sitting to one side of the hallway. The man's face was pale and his eyes stared blankly up at the ceiling.

Frantic shouts and calls for help drew his attention away from the comatose photographer (Colin had been employed by the *Daily Prophet* when Draco had abducted and interrogated him). A couple of Healers hurried past, one of them shoving Draco aside, closely followed by a trio of Medi-witches.

"Dammit," someone shouted, "We need a Blood Replenishing Potion, now!"

"We've already given him two," called another voice, this one female. "A third dose could kill him!"

"If we don't, he'll die anyway!"

His curiosity getting the better of him, a rare occurrence for a Slytherin, Draco followed in the wake of the Healers and was soon standing in outside one of St. Mungo's emergency rooms. Inside the Healers and Medi-witches were crowded around a lone figure, which was convulsing on a stretcher in the middle of the group. Two burly-looking orderlies were trying to hold him down with limited success.

A momentary gap between two Healers was enough to give Draco a glimpse of who they were struggling to save. His legs gave out beneath him as he recognised the face and it was only by clutching at the doorframe he was standing by that he managed to remain upright.

Clinging to the doorway for support, Draco felt as if the earth had suddenly fallen out from under him. The tall, dark haired man currently bleeding to death not twenty feet away was Blaise Zabini.

"Messy way to go."

Draco looked over his shoulder to see that Neville Longbottom was standing just behind him, watching the scene in the emergency room with a dispassionate interest.

"What the bloody hell happened?" asked Draco, hoping that the Auror might be able to tell him.

"We don't know," Neville shrugged. "We found him like that, lying in the street gutter on the Muggle side of the Leaky Cauldron. From the look of it, somebody hit him with dozens of unknown Cutting Curses. He's literally covered from head to toe in deep lacerations. He's also had several chunks of meat torn off by some means we can't identify."

"We're losing him!" yelled one of the Medi-wizards as Zabini's convulsions became even more violent.

"Noooooo!" shrieked Zabini in a voice filled with terror. He arched up off the stretcher, his spine bending like a bow being drawn taut as he knocked the orderlies back. "Don't open it! Don't open it!"

"Shut him up and for Merlin's sake hold him down!" shouted a Healer.

"Don't open it," repeated Neville thoughtfully. "Interesting."

A strangled cry, so loud and piercing that everyone present clamped their hands over their ears, was the last sound Zabini managed before he collapsed. The sudden silence seemed deafening, until one of the Healers pressed his fingers against the limp body's neck and checked for a pulse.

"He's gone," he finally said.

"Resuscitation?" suggested one Healer.

"With these injuries?" asked another. The woman shook her head. "It's over."

"Oh Merlin," Draco choked out, turning and rushing to a nearby wastebasket to empty his stomach. Once the twisting in his insides stilled, he looked up to see Neville standing a short distance away, waiting for him. "What are you looking at, Longbottom?" he snarled. "Getting your jollies seeing a



Malfoy lose his lunch?"

"I'm only trying to help you, Draco," said Neville, holding his hands up apologetically. "All I want is to find out the truth, but I can't do that unless you start talking to me."

"Fine, ask your bloody questions," Draco relented, wiping his chin clean with a handkerchief.

"Where were you on the night of the thirteenth," asked Neville bluntly, but keeping his voice soft and undemanding. "And I'd also like to know the locations of your friends; Zabini, over there," he nodded towards the emergency room, "and Theodore Nott at around the same time."

"I don't know, I can't remember," said Draco truthfully.

"All right," accepted Neville. There was a long pause, then he asked, "Have you seen your wife lately, Draco?"

"Pansy? More often than I'd like," grumbled Draco. "Why?"

"When was the last time you saw Pansy?" insisted Neville.

"I don't know, yesterday perhaps? I haven't seen her any time today, or tonight, if that's what you're asking."

"Do you know where she might be?"

"Out wasting my money," sighed Draco, becoming frustrated by the repetition.

"I see," said Neville with a nod. He smiled, one that did not really reach his eyes, and gave Draco a tip of an imaginary hat. "Well, that's enough for now. Good evening, Mister Malfoy."

"Wait," called Draco before Neville went too far. "Why do you want to know about Pansy?"

"Oh, it's nothing really," Neville replied. He gave a nonchalant shrug and admitted, "We've just been having a bit of trouble hunting her down. Night."

Draco watched silently as Neville strode away, disappearing into a waiting lift. The fact that Pansy might also be missing, like his Ministry informants and Nott, had never crossed his mind. This revelation left Draco in something of a quandary. On the one hand, Pansy was his wife, which carried a certain degree of obligation. On the other hand, Draco would normally consider himself better off if Pansy had indeed vanished.

His headache, which seemed to have become a constant of his existence, had returned with a vengeance and Draco found it difficult to think straight. Searching his robe pockets, he discovered that the potions he had stocked up with at Nott's house had been removed, leaving him without a means to alleviate his ailing head.

Cursing under his breath, Draco headed towards the lifts. Passing by the now empty emergency room, he paused to stare inside. Zabini's body lay abandoned on the stretcher it had been brought in on. Nothing had been done to cover it, leaving the dreadful wounds exposed to the world.

He gave the newly deceased man, whom he sometimes called 'friend', a final and dispassionate look. "Tough break, Blaise, but better you than me," he said in conclusion.

-oOo-

### *Zabini Penthouse*

Rather than risk Apparating again, especially after having supposedly Splinched himself, Draco was forced to find an alternate method of transportation. Deciding to avoid the bumpy ride of a Floo connection and not even bothering to consider using the Knight Bus, this left Draco with the options of either walking or using a Muggle taxi.

As humiliating as it was to admit, Draco had little knowledge of London's street and would have quickly become lost had he tried to walk to his destination. Making use of a Muggle vehicle, however, was a different kind of humiliation.

"'Ere you are, guvna!" chirped the taxi driver as the car pulled up to the curb.

Draco, who had been silently contemplating the twilight sky for most of the journey, looked around to see that they had arrived at the apartment block where Blaise and Daphne lived.

"Tha'll be eighteen quid sixty," said the driver, checking the meter.

"Here, keep the change," said Draco. Having almost no understanding of Muggle money, for Merlin's sake they gave it the same name as a measurement of weight, Draco handed over a stack of paper bills.

Accepting payment, the driver's eyes widened and he would have bowed with gratitude had he not been sitting behind the steering wheel. "Cor, thank's guv! Anytime you need a ride, jus' ask for Spencer and the lads'll call me fer you."

Grunting by reply, Draco climbed out of the taxi and walked into the building without comment. Entering the lobby, he approached the front desk, where the watch guard was sitting. The man was reading the sports section of a Muggle newspaper and only noticed Draco when the blonde cleared his throat.

Oh, sorry for that, sir," he apologised, "I didn't hear you come in."

"I need to see Daphne Zabini," said Draco without preamble.

"Right, the penthouse suite," the guard nodded. "Let me just call them."

Draco grit his teeth and drew his wand. "I don't have the time. *Imperio!* Now, let me through."

The guard lowered the telephone he had just picked up and returned it to its holder. He then reached under the desk and pushed the button that released the gate. "Yes sir," he mumbled. "Right away, sir."

"Go back to your paper," muttered Draco, striding to the bank of lifts.

"Yes sir, thank you, sir," said the guard, doing as commanded.

Riding the lift up to the penthouse, Draco contemplated why he had come here, rather than return to Malfoy Manor. It was not because of Daphne, that much he was certain. Their relationship was a purely carnal one and it would not make an ounce of difference to Draco if she lived, disappeared or even died. Ambitious young witches willing to spread their legs were not that difficult to find.

No, what Draco needed was information. Knowledge, as any good Slytherin and some of the smarter Ravenclaws would tell you, was power. He had already searched his own manor and Nott's house, had seen and read all that he could find there. It was here, at Zabini's house, that something new might be discovered. Something that might explain what the devil was going on.

With a soft chime the lift reached the top floor and the doors slid open. Draco stepped out into the hall and hurried to the door to the Zabini penthouse. Hammering his fist against the door, he waited impatiently for Daphne to let him inside. This time, he resolved, he would not let her distract him.

After an impatient few seconds wherein Daphne did not answer to his knocking, Draco pounded on the door again, this time hard enough to rattle the door in its frame.

"Daphne!" he barked through the door. "Let me in, dammit! Daphne!"

This continued for several minutes, demanding knocks interspersed with yells entreating Daphne to open the door. Finally Draco could not wait any longer and he drew his wand. The spells and wards sealing the front door were some of the most complicated used for private residences, but eventually he managed to force his way around them.

The door swung inwards silently, revealing that the penthouse's lights were still on. Now remembering how quickly and silently Nott had been taken, Draco entered cautiously, wand held at the ready. The only reason for Daphne not to answer the door was that she too was now a victim of whatever was going on.

He checked the rooms, one by one, every instinct screaming that something was terrible wrong and that he would do well to flee rather than investigate. The drawing room was as he remembered. It was also empty. The same with the kitchen, the visitor's bathroom and both Blaise and Daphne's studies.

Finally, there was only one room left. The master bedroom. Creeping along the short passageway leading to the room, Draco could feel his apprehension mounting as if it were a palpable thing.

Stepping into the room, Draco immediately wished he had followed his earlier instinct to flee.

Daphne sat naked, propped up in the bed, legs spread obscenely wide and her beautiful eyes staring lifelessly into his. Draco gazed at her face, pale in the twilight shadows and twisted into a mask of horror and pain. He looked steadily at it until his stomach revolted and bile flooded up his throat. Once his heaving stomach had emptied itself of every meal he had ever consumed, Draco forced himself to take a closer look at the grim tableau in front of him.

Deep but bloodless cuts marred Daphne's once smooth flesh. The incisions joined to form intricate designs, patterns and what could only be runes. Every square inch of her body, her arms and her legs had been painstakingly carved upon. Only her face had been spared; an island of beauty above a sea of gore. What little of her skin that was not sliced open was the bluish-white of a corpse drained of all its blood, most of which appeared to have soaked into the bed sheets.

While normally the sight of Daphne's most intimate regions was something Draco took great enjoyment from, the sight that now greeted him was enough to make him shudder with revulsion. As with the rest of her body, there seemed to be some sort of ritualistic method to the mutilation, but this went beyond any kind of Dark Art that Draco had ever heard of.

Unable to bear looking at his lover's butchered corpse any longer, Draco staggered out of the bedroom and to the guest bathroom. After washing out his mouth and taking a Pain Relieving Potion he found in the bathroom, he went to search through Blaise's study for any clues that might help him.

"Where would I keep my notes if I was a paranoid Slytherin information hoarder?" asked Draco. A few seconds later he blinked and shook his head. "What am I talking about - I *am* a paranoid Slytherin information hoarder. And now I'm talking to *myself*."

It took some doing, and a few Revealing Charms along the way, but Draco eventually uncovered Blaise's safe. It was built into the floor and hidden under a dozen Concealment Charms and a four-hundred year old Persian flying carpet. Draco had to sift through several stacks of useless

documents before he found what he was looking for.

Confusion was what Draco felt as he skimmed the notes Blaise had taken.

From what he could make out, Blaise had been doing extensive research on several ancient artefacts. It read like something right out of myths, legends and what could only be called the ravings of madmen. This made absolutely no sense, since the object they were interested in had been made by Potter, barely a decade ago. How could anything dating so much further than that be of any use?

There were references to diaries, ancient tomes, scrolls and other records that Blaise had tracked down while looking for information on DAA #1138. Blaise's notes were rather dry and clinical, but the direct quotes he included managed to catch Draco's attention far more readily.

*"Bizarre and intricate designs covered its faces," wrote Bolingbroke in his journal, while the diary of de Rais' spoke of, "an incomparably beautiful filigree of metal, wood and many other unrecognisable substances. It was both wondrous, yet horrifying to gaze upon."*

Later there was part of a letter, penned by the Comte de Saint Germain in the mid eighteenth century.

*"Its true purpose continues to elude me, but I am beginning to understand the connection between its dormant and active states. Perhaps the solution lies in changing the configuration or perhaps the purpose..."*

Next there was a translation of a scroll Blaise had tracked down in the archives of the St. Salamanca De La Necros Negro Biblious brotherhood in Spain.

*"Its geometric structure can be configured into almost infinite combinations, each of which has the potential to open a different schism from within the puzzle."*

Despite the fact that it should have bored him to tears, Draco was unaccountable fascinated. If these accounts were correct, then it was looking more and more as if Potter had based his creation upon some earlier work. Certainly it appeared that Blaise had uncovered more to this than simply the defeat of Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

The only thing Blaise had failed to supply was a definite description. A text would make mention of a globe in one paragraph, but refer to the object as if it had corners in the next. Some of the older manuscripts had a few disjointed sketches, but those proved to be details of individual sections, rather than the whole.

It was both enlightening, yet frustrating reading.

*"Frustrating is not the word for it," he said, pacing in agitation.*

*"You're saying you didn't get anything at all?" asked Blaise from where he was sitting by the fireplace.*

*"No," admitted Draco. "Not one of the spells for reversing Memory Charms worked and the only thing the Cruciatus did was break the little sycophant's mind."*

*"Creevey's an idiot," said Nott dismissively. "Even if you had gotten something out of him, I doubt it would have been of much use to us."*

*The three wizards had gathered here today, at the Zabini's penthouse, to discuss their progress. They were scattered about the drawing room, Blaise by the fire, Nott on one of the couches, and Draco pacing about. It seemed that only Draco was aware of Daphne, flitting about helpfully, but quietly listening to every word. He would have to ask her opinion on all this the next time they were in bed together.*

Returning to the present, he turned to Blaise and asked, *"What about you? D'you have anything?"*

*"Quite a lot, actually," admitted Blaise. He leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs out. "I started my research on the assumption that the object Potter used to defeat Voldemort is not too different from the constructs he sells out of APPT."*

*"And?" prompted Nott impatiently.*

*"Oddly enough, I think it is," confirmed Blaise.*

*"So we're talking about a magical artefact that manipulates space, time and energy," concluded Draco thoughtfully. "If it was done properly, it could have given Potter the edge to defeat the Dark Lord. Assuming, of course, that his original is more powerful than those toys he sells."*

*"It is," said Blaise. "Though it looks like Potter might not be the actual creator."*

*"What?"*

*"I was checking some historical books, looking for some precedents," explained Blaise. "I found dozens of recordings of mysterious disappearances, just like what happened with the Dark Lord. Incidents of people vanishing without a trace not long after revealing or finding some sort of ancient puzzle."*

*"That still doesn't explain how Potter did what he did," observed Nott.*

Blaise shrugged. *"Sorry, none of the archives say how any of those things happened, just that an unstoppable force was released - either by accident or design. Most of them seem more interested in describing the event, rather than what happened to cause it."*

*Draco finally took a set and turned to Nott, "Theo? Anything from the Ministry?"*

*Nott grinned smugly and reached for the briefcase he had brought with him. "Nothing as informative as Blaise's history lesson," he said, "but definitely a great deal more useful."*

*"Unless you've found the exact location of where Potter keeps DAA #1138," ground out Blaise, insulted by Nott's dismissal of his research, "I doubt it could be that useful."*

*"As a matter of fact," Nott gloated, presenting Blaise and Draco with a large roll of parchment.*

*"You're joking," breathed Draco. "You know where it is?"*

*"Not for certain," admitted Nott as he unrolled the parchment and displayed it for them to see. "However, one look here will give you a good idea."*

*"Architectural plans to the All Purpose Potter Tools premises," read Blaise, leaning over the coffee table. He grimaced and gave Nott a grudging nod of acknowledgement. "You were right, this is useful."*

*"Here," said Draco, pointing to the plans.*

*While Nott and Blaise had been speaking, Draco had begun to examine the drawings spread out before him. He had quickly found the business' security vault. It was located on the top floor, behind Potter's office, and was not even remotely on par with anything Gringotts could offer.*

*Blaise, who was now leaning over Draco's shoulder, whistled. "Damn. Potter must be either a complete idiot or a fully fledged egomaniac to think something like this could protect anything so important. My garden shed has better security."*

*"Never underestimate the size of Potter's ego," drawled Draco.*

*"I'm also surprised he even bothered to file these at the Ministry," said Blaise.*

*"Potter probably wouldn't have bothered," said Nott, "but his bitch did it for him."*

*"Thank Merlin for pedantic mudbloods, eh?" asked Draco.*

*"Just goes to show, everyone's good for something," joked Zabini.*

*Unexpected knocking from the front door, firm yet undemanding; drew their attention away from the plans spread across the coffee table. They were close to drawing wands, just in case they needed to Obliviate someone, when Daphne flounced past.*

*"Not to worry boys," she told them, "that'll be Tracey. We're going shopping."*

*Draco blinked, rapidly becoming aware that the knocking he could hear was part of the here and now, rather than part of a memory. He was about to go and see who it could be, when a loud, hostile and distressingly familiar voice yelled through the front door.*

*"Open up, Malfoy!" called Ron Weasley in a strident tone. "We know you're in there!"*

*"Bollocks!" swore Draco.*

*He did not doubt that Ron would be blasting the door down within a matter of minutes, more intent on getting his man than following proper Auror procedures. And letting the irritable redhead discover all of Blaise's plans and notes would be a sure fire way to stir up his ire and start him throwing hexes about.*

*Draco hastily threw everything he had been reading back into the floor safe, not bothering to return them as he had found them, as he simply did not have the time. Once everything was stored away he slammed the safe's door shut and reactivated the Concealment Charms, conscious all the while of the incessant pounding against the front door.*

*Throwing the Persian carpet over the concealed safe, he rushed to the fireplace. In his hurry Draco toppled over the pot holding the Floo powder, but did not try to right it. Instead he scooped up a handful of the powder that now lay scattered about and tossed it into the fire. The flames crackled and then flared a bright emerald green.*

*"Malfoy Manor!" he ordered just as the sound of the front door breaking in reached his ears.*

*-oOo-*

*Malfoy Manor*

*Draco came rocketing out of the fireplace as if he had just been fired from a Muggle cannon. He skidded across the floor, eventually coming to a halt in a tangle of limbs and robes. It took some time straightening himself out, especially as he was almost overwhelmed by dizziness, but Draco standing upright.*

Too close, Draco," he muttered to himself.

He staggered unsteadily to the nearby liquor cabinet. Flinging the glass doors open, he grabbed the first bottle in reach, pulled out the cork and took a deep gulp straight from the bottle's mouth. As it was a bottle of two-hundred year old Odgen's Fire-Whiskey, this proved to be a somewhat painful thing to do.

"Gak," he choked, the liquor burning his throat and sending steam shooting from his ears as he reeled back and fell into one of the living room couches. Recovering somewhat, even though his eyes were awash with tears, Draco repeated this two more times in rapid succession.

Bolstered by the whiskey, Draco lurched to his feet and hurried out the living room and to his study. Passing through the main hallway, he paused and yelled, "Pansy! Pansy!"

He did not think Pansy would be of much use in helping him get to the bottom of the mystery, but he had hoped she might be enough to distract any Aurors that might arrive. Not hearing a reply, Draco continued on to his study, cursing all the while over Pansy's uselessness.

Bursting into the room, Draco immediately went to his desk. He had searched it earlier, though he was not completely sure about that, but felt the need to check. Perhaps he had missed something. Dropping heavily into his chair, he began to sort through the various papers stacked about the desktop.

Nothing immediately jumped out at him, but then again, Draco was limiting himself to cursory glances - time being a luxury he did not have to waste. Growing frustrated, he swept an angry arm across the desk and dumped everything onto the floor.

"Merlin's ball!" he swore furiously, throwing himself back in his chair, almost to the point that he toppled over.

Recovering his balance, he began to search his desk's drawers. Those on the right proved to have nothing of any interest, mostly stationary and supplies. He turned to the left. The top drawer contained a half-filled box of Peruvian Cigars, which his father had smoked on the rare occasion. The middle draw held some stock portfolios Draco had been reading over.

Opening the bottom drawer, Draco froze in place. It was almost as if he had triggered a Full-Body Bind, only he knew that it was not magic that held him immobile.

Hundreds, no, thousands of plain Muggle business cards filled the drawer to the brim, actually overflowing as several fell out and to the floor. He recognised them immediately. Blank, yet yellowed with age, and bearing only three words.

## **ALL PROBLEMS SOLVED**

The pain struck without warning or mercy, as Draco had come to expect. He had no chance to stave off the assault and could only hope to ride it out as he had before.

*"What's your pleasure, sir?" asked the man, in a somewhat Asian accent.*

*"I'm Draco Malfoy," said Draco, warily stepping aside as the old man shuffled past him and into place behind the counter. Hoping his nervousness was not apparent, Draco continued, "I was told you could help me find something I've been looking for."*

*"And that is?"*

*"The power that defeated Lord Voldemort."*

*"Hmm," mused the old man thoughtfully, stroking his moustache.*

*"Well?" demanded Draco impatiently.*

*The old man seemed to consider for a moment, then nodded and lifted his head. Draco could not help but gasp when the old man's piercing eyes focused on him. They were dark beyond belief, like glittering pools of liquid agate, and having seen those eyes Draco could not doubt the old man's next words.*

*"I can see into your soul."*

*"My soul?" asked Draco, suddenly feeling wary.*

*"Yes," the old man nodded. "Your anger... your resentment at the world around you, the world you wish to change... it festers within you like a malignant tumour."*

*Draco nodded reluctantly and admitted, "I want to bring back the old ways, yes."*

*The old man leaned against the counter, his hands steepled in front of him. He regarded Draco with a strange dispassion, and said, "You desire power. The power your family was once able to exert, but no longer holds. You desire influence. The influence your name once carried, to bend those that think they rule to your will."*

*"That's it, yes," confessed Draco, a feeling of eagerness growing within his chest. There was the smallest feeling of unease as well, but he ignored it.*

*"I cannot give you power or influence," stated the old man.*

*"I was told you could!" insisted Draco, anger replacing his excitement.*

*"One cannot give a person either of those things, Mister Malfoy," explained the old man patiently, not reacting in the slightest to the face of Draco's belligerence. "Power and influence are abstracts. They cannot change hands as easily as mere currency."*

*"What then?" Draco demanded.*

*"I cannot give them to you, but I can show you the way to power and influence beyond human ken," the old man told him, his black eyes glinting with promise.*

*"How?"*

*"With a map."*

*"A map?" repeated Draco.*

*"A map, sir," the old man smiled. "It will show you the way."*

*Draco frowned sceptically and asked, "The way to where?"*

*The old man smiled again and turned to pull up a stool, which he sat upon. Once comfortable he returned his attention to Draco and began to explain.*

*"There are many maps of this kind scattered about the earth. One is secured in the vaults of the Vatican, hidden in the writings of a theological treatise unread since the Reformation. Another was an origami exercise, once in the possession of the Marquis de Sade, who used it while incarcerated in the Bastille, to barter with a guard for paper on which he wrote 'The 120 Days of Sodom'."*

*"And how are these going to help me?" asked Draco impatiently.*

*"Because, Mister Malfoy," explained the old man, "one such map rests in the hands of your nemesis."*

*"Potter!" spat Draco.*

*"Yes, Harry Potter," confirmed the old man. "He built it himself, after many months of toil, using his memories, his dreams and his nightmares to recreate that which he had destroyed in his youth. Once complete he presented it to the world as a simple, musical puzzle box."*

*"A puzzle box?" repeated Draco dubiously.*

*"Yes. It breaks the surface of reality. It creates the schism to cross boundaries. It opens a door to that which you seek. It was that power which overwhelmed the so-called Dark Lord."*

*Hearing this, there was only one question Draco needed to ask. "How do I open it?"*

*"That, I can show you," replied the old man. "But," he held up a finger in warning, "but, once you choose to cross the threshold, you cannot return. Do you understand?"*

*Draco nodded. "I do."*

*The old man gave him a narrow stare and asked, "And are you willing to pay the price?"*

*Draco sneered and reached into his robe. He pulled out a money bag, filled with galleons, and tossed it onto the counter. The drawstring was loose enough that several coins were able to spill out and scatter before the old man.*

*The old man smiled; the smile of someone who knows a secret.*

*"Oh, the price is far greater than mere money, but you'll discover that for yourself."*

*The images of the old man and his store faded out to be replaced by Draco's study at Malfoy Manor. Draco himself was laid out on the floor, barely able to move. His every nerve ending seemed to be on fire, while the rest of him was frozen in ice. It was an experience not dissimilar to the Cruciatus Curse.*

*Finally pushing himself up, more leaning than sitting, Draco fumbled about his robes. In the front pocket of his shirt he found the first business card he had discovered. Its innocuous appearance gave him pause, but Draco thought he was now beginning to understand.*

*Grabbing the edge of his desk with one hand, Draco levered himself to his feet. He had a trip to make, in the deepest and darkest corner of Knockturn Alley.*

*-oOo-*

*Knockturn Alley, All Problems Solved premises*

Unable to Floo to his destination, Draco had no choice but to Apparate. To counter the effects of his splitting headache, he took a Pain Dampening Potion immediately before leaving Malfoy Manor. Arriving in Knockturn Alley, not far from Borgin and Burkes, Draco quickly drank another of the same potion. He knew it was dangerous to have so many of these potions in such short periods, but right now Draco had a feeling he could not afford to be distracted by anything.

Drawing the hood of his robes up, making sure to hide his face, Draco hurried down the alley to the building that housed All Problems Solved.

The building was exactly as he remembered it, save for the fact that the sign for All Problems Solve was no longer hanging above the door. Suspecting the worst, Draco did not waste any time entering and finding the stairs leading down into the basement.

As before, the basement was in worse condition than the rest of the building. Directly opposite the stairs was the door to the room where Draco had met the old man. He grabbed the grimy doorknob, this time not even noticing the filth covering it, and entered.

The room was completely and utterly empty, save for the counter, exactly as it had been before. Draco checked behind the door, but the old man was not hiding there. It did not take long to determine that either nobody was around, or the old man had relocated his store to someplace else. Draco had a feeling it was a case of the latter, rather than the former.

He was about to leave when something odd caught his eye. Cautiously approaching the counter, Draco could not begin to describe what he felt as he saw what was laid out, as if waiting for him. It was a pair of Muggle-type photographs of his father, Lucius, and his aunt, Bellatrix Lestrange.

Swallowing hard, Draco picked the photos and examined them. While it was hard to tell with Bellatrix, whom Draco had only met half a dozen times, but the pictures seemed to date from about the time both she and Lucius had disappeared during Voldemort's failed attempt to capture Hogwarts.

Turning the pictures over, Draco froze and the photographs fell from numb fingers. Written on the back of each photograph, in firm, but elegant handwriting, were two words.

## **PROBLEM SOLVED**

Now Draco was positive that he had been set up. Considering the fact that Potter was apparently missing, and seemed to be the centre of all this, it stood to reason that the so-called Boy-Who-Lived was somehow behind this.

Fleeing from the room and leaving the photographs behind, Draco dashed up the stairs and out the rundown building. Once outside he paused to catch his breath. The potions seemed to be wearing off, their effectiveness decreasing each time he used them. Leaning against the wall, he stared up at the twilight sky, hoping to distract his mind from the mounting pain.

"Oh God, it hurts," he muttered, massaging his temples.

"'Hurt', how dare you use that word," commented a deep, regal voice from the shadows. "What you think of as pain is but a shadow. Pain has a face, allow me to show it to you."

Draco looked wildly about, but could not see whoever it was that spoke. "Who's there?! Where are you!?"

This time the voice seemed closer as it said, "Here."

Draco turned to where the voice had come from and froze. There was nobody there. There was, however, a rather large puddle of muddy water spread across the cobblestone alleyway. And the image of Draco's unseen companion was perfectly reflected therein. He looked around for a source to the reflection, but there was none.

It was difficult to tell, but it was a fairly tall man that stood reflected before Draco. He was dressed entirely in a garment of black leather that seemed like a twisted mockery of some sort of ceremonial robes. Hooks and chains were gruesomely entwined and interlaced with the material, and the man's body itself.

The man's head, utterly bald, hung like a pale moon above his body. Deep and bloodless gashes sliced across and down his face, roughly an inch apart. These parallel slashes formed a grid-like pattern that stood in stark contrast against his blue-white flesh. At the intersection of each of these lines, gleaming steel pins had been driven into his skull.

His eyes were black as the abyss and equally bottomless. He regarded Draco with a blank expression, yet it was obvious he wielded inhuman power. Dressed all in black and with his arms folded behind him, he looked like a rigorously disciplined priest. Or a ruthless and merciless inquisitor.

"Good God," was all Draco could think to say.

"Oh no," the dark man said. "Quite the opposite."

Pinhead, known as an angel to some and a demon to others, remained perfectly still and watched Draco from where he was reflected in the water. He seemed to be waiting for the stunned wizard to speak. His image wavered as the water rippled slightly. After a minute passed in silence, it became apparent that Draco was not about to start the conversation.

"Draco," Pinhead declared calmly. "I've been waiting for you."

"You - you know me?" asked Draco, struggling not to turn and run.

"We've never met," admitted Pinhead, "but you might say I'm an old acquaintance of your father."

Draco made the connection and glared at the demon's reflection, his anger briefly overriding his fear. "Problem solved," he snarled, repeating what had been written on the backs of the photographs. "It was you - you're the one that killed my father and Aunt Bella!"

Pinhead inclined his head a fraction and stated, "Death, Draco, is only the beginning."

"What? What are you talking about?" demanded Draco.

"Confused?" asked Pinhead. His rich baritone remained utterly free of tone and inflection, yet Draco got the impression that the demon was secretly amused. "Not to worry," Pinhead continued. "You'll understand... after you solve the puzzle."

"Why are you doing this to me? What did I ever do to you?" asked Draco desperately. He paused as a gleam of understanding entered his eye. "It's because of Potter, isn't it?" he accused. "He's the one that's making you do this. He wants you to kill me like you killed my father."

"Harry has a part to play in this, yes," admitted Pinhead. "But then, so do we all."

"Listen," Draco pleaded. "Whatever he's paying you - I'll double it."

"The price is far greater than mere money, Draco, as you will soon realize," Pinhead informed him, using words similar to those of the old man from All Problems Solved. "The puzzle has been solved. You have opened the box. All that remains is for you to willingly peer into its depths."

By now Draco's anxiety had grown to a fever pitch and so he acted without thinking. His wand was in hand and aimed down at the puddle in a blur of motion, the spell already leaving his lips as he finished the movement.

*"Percussio!"*

The curse slammed into the shallow pool before the last echoes of Draco's voice had died away. The puddle itself exploded in a fountain of water that reached up several feet. Because of the angle of the impact, almost none of the mud that sprayed out landed on Draco, though he did feel a few spots splatter across his face. Once the spout had collapsed back into the hollow, the surface of the puddle was a discordant morass of glittering light and shadow. Slowly it began to settle down, revealing that Pinhead's reflection was nowhere to be seen.

Approaching voices alerted Draco to the fact that his impotent attack against the water had drawn unwanted attention to himself. He started to run, keeping his wand at the ready should he need it. He did not stop until he was on the opposite side of Knockturn Alley from All Problems Solved.

Needing to catch his breath before continuing, he ducked into a small back alleyway between two shops. After checking to see that nobody had followed him, Draco relaxed and turned into his hiding place. He found himself face to disfigured face with an abomination.

Like all of Pinhead's subordinates, the creature was clad entirely in black leather and was severely mutilated. Its lips were peeled back from its mouth by half a dozen hooked wires, thus exposing its teeth in an eternal death's head grin. The rest of its face had been warped into a single mass of scar tissue that completely covered its eyes, ears and nose.

For several seconds, the two stared at each other. A grim tableau. Then the faceless monster chattered excitedly, its teeth clicking rapidly together. It lifted one hand into the light, revealing that it held a blood-stained meat hook. Draco was running before the motion had been completed.

He had not taken five steps back into the main thoroughfare of Knockturn Alley before he slammed into another figure. They tumbled to the cobblestone ground in a heap. Draco frantically rolled away, stabbing his wand in the direction of his assailant and firing off a nasty Bludgeoning Hex.

"Slytherin's balls, Malfoy!" cried a familiar voice as the figure narrowly avoided the hex.

"Nott?" asked Draco, pausing uncertainly.

"Who the bloody hell else would be out looking for you?!" demanded Nott, heaving himself up.

"Thank Merlin," Draco breathed in relief. "I thought you were dead like the others."

Nott glared at him, his face contorted into an expression of pure hatred that Draco did not understand. "What makes you think I'm not?" growled Nott. "You opened that damned box and now we're both walking dead men! Those monsters of Potter's have already gotten to Blaise and Daphne, and everyone else; I'm not going to let them get me too!"

"Then stop arguing and help me find a way to stop them!" snapped Draco, grabbing the other man by the front of his robes and giving him a shake.

"I already know how to stop them," replied Nott, suddenly calm.

It was disturbing how quickly he had shifted moods, so Draco released his hold on Nott's robes and cautiously backed away from him. "How?" he asked.

Nott broke into an insane smile. "By giving them you, of course."

Having almost expected this, Draco was moving even as Nott began to draw his wand. Draco's own wand had been dropped when he grabbed Nott. They were too close for him to try and reclaim it, so Draco took the only action he could. He jumped at Nott before the draw was complete and



tried to wrestle the wand away from him.

Before long they had fallen to the ground once again, continuing to vie for the wand. Draco found himself at a definite disadvantage, as Nott was larger and subsequently stronger than him. Nott was not as solidly built as Crabbe or Goyle might have been, but he had an easy stone of weight over Draco. It was proven when Nott buried a hard fist in Draco's stomach, knocking the breath out of him and leaving him too winded to continue.

"Stop fighting, Malfoy," commanded Nott, straddling Draco and trying to force his arms behind his back. "It'll be better for you to just go along with it."

"No," Draco managed to gasp out.

"Wouldn't you rather one of us gets out alive, Draco, instead of both of us dying?" asked Nott, leaning close to whisper the question in Draco's ear.

Draco was pinned down and his arms were trapped under Nott's weight. The fight was all but over, until Nott made the mistake of bringing his head closer to Draco's. Gritting his teeth and preparing to accept the agony he knew would come, Draco slammed his head backward.

The crown of his skull smashed against Nott's chin with a crack. Nott gasped and briefly lost his grip on Draco's arms, allowing him to twist around beneath him. Nott's hands were occupied with his split and bloody lips, leaving him exposed. Draco whipped one arm up, ignoring the sharp pain that pierced his skull, and grabbed Nott by the back of the head.

"If anyone's getting out alive," he spat, "it's me!"

Pulling down and sideways with all his strength and weight, Draco slammed Nott's head into the stone floor. There was a meaty thwack, which was repeated as Draco lifted his arm up and smashed it down again. He did not blink as a few drops of blood splattered across his face. He continued to ram Nott's head into the ground until the bigger man's body lay limply over him.

It seemed that hours passed before Draco managed to catch his breath enough to drag himself free from Nott's dead weight. Inspecting the body, he found that Nott's mashed and bloody features were almost unrecognizable. There was no doubt that he had joined Blaise, Daphne and all the others in death.

"Dammit, Theodore, you unsubtle oaf," he swore harshly. "Why?"

"Why indeed?" asked a flighty voice from behind him. "Would you care to comment, Draco, on this latest murder you've committed? I'm certain our readers will be eager to hear your own account of what happened."

Too tired to bother moving quickly, and having recognised the voice immediately, Draco turned to find the intrepid Luna "Loony" Weasley, though she still published under the name of Lovegood. The thin blonde witch was standing not five yards away, fedora doffed at a jaunty angle and a wretched Quick Quotes Quill held at the ready. Draco dropped his head into his hands and groaned.

"Please, Draco," beseeched Luna, "the Quibbler would love to run the article for you."

"Loony," snarled Draco as he raised his head to glare at her. "What in the name of Merlin are you talking about? I did not 'murder' Nott, or anyone else for that matter! If you've been here long enough to see what happened, then you know it was self-defence!"

"But Draco," observed Luna, "Nott only became aggressive after you provoked him with that Bludgeoning Hex."

"He startled me," Draco protested. "And you heard what he said - he was going to kill me!"

"Why do you make that sound like a bad thing?" asked Luna, scribbling furiously with her quill.

"You bitch!" hissed Draco, clenching his fists.

"Of course," agreed Luna happily. "I love having sex that way... doesn't Pansy?"

"Pansy?" repeated Draco dumbly. Luna's unexpected reply to his insult, containing far too much information for his liking, had momentarily thrown something of a wrench in the works of his thought process.

"Yes, Pansy," Luna prompted, rocking her head airily from side to side. "You know, Pansy Parkinson, now Pansy Malfoy? Your estranged wife? The one you've been cheating on with Daphne Zabini? The one that's officially missing, presumed dead?"

"Missing? Pansy's missing?" asked Draco.

"Well, naturally. She wouldn't be missing if anyone knew where she was," said Luna.

Deciding that enough was enough, Draco began to search for his, or even Nott's wand. For one, he needed to give Luna a Memory Charm, perhaps even kill her. Nott's brutal death at his hands, and the events leading up to it, was not something he wished to explain to the Ministry. Particularly as Ron Weasley would likely be heading the investigation.

Unfortunately his old school wand, and Nott's, had seemingly disappeared - lost in the twilight shadows. Briefly Draco considered the idea of killing Luna with his bare hands, as he had done with Nott. He did not have time, however, as he could hear the sounds of people coming.

"Now I know how Potter felt about Rita Skeeter," grumbled Draco.

"Come now, Draco," said Luna. "No need to be facetious. You can trust me to tell the world the true story of how you bashed Theodore's head into a bloody pulp. And how you carved ancient, not to mention perverse, writings into the flesh of your mistress; Daphne. Or how you all but gutted her poor husband, Blaise, in some dark ritual devised to bring an end to your well-documented inferiority complex."

"I didn't kill them!" roared Draco, advancing on her.

"But I saw you do it," countered Luna matter-of-factly.

Furious, Draco roughly shoved Luna aside. She staggered, but managed to retain her feet even as Draco stormed past her towards the opening leading into Diagon Alley. She called something out to him, but Draco did not hear it over the blood roaring in his ears in time to the pounding of his skull.

This was all Potter's fault. Potter had done this to him. The bastard had somehow contrived this entire scenario; from the Ministry files on *Dark Arts Artefact #1138*, to making the plans to the All Purpose Potter Tools building so readily available, to the puzzle box and the monsters contained therein. That pinheaded demon had all but admitted it.

Potter was the source of it all, which meant that Potter was who Draco had to find.

-oOo-

*Vertik Alley, All Purpose Potter Tools premises*

Draco stormed through Diagon Alley with a grim purpose the likes of which he had never experienced before. The revelation that Potter was the cause of all his ills fuelled his growing anger. Yet, even as he passed Gringotts and crossed into Vertik Alley, Draco was forced to admire the brilliance of Potter's deception.

Creating a dark artefact and using it to lure his enemies into a trap. Faking his own disappearance, so that nobody would suspect him. Oh, it had to be faked. He grudgingly had to admit that Potter was too mean to die, at least not so neatly and not without taking a great many attackers with him. And while the Aurors were busy searching for him, he could send out those horrid creatures to act as assassins. It was something worthy of a Slytherin.

Passing by the new premises that the Daily Prophet had moved to five years ago, Draco's pace slowed as he began to wonder. There had been rumours during their school years, that Potter had almost been sorted into Slytherin, but had convinced the Sorting Hat to put him in Gryffindor. Nobody had given the idea much credence, but now Draco pondered if those rumours might not have had some truth to them. After only a few seconds thought, he came to the conclusion that it made perfect sense. He also felt a small degree of jealousy that he had not come up with such a clever scheme.

What better place for a Slytherin to hide, than amongst the Gryffindors?

It went against almost two decades of grain, but Draco felt himself realize that Potter was a far more dangerous foe than he had ever believed. Such trickery. Such cunning. Yes, there was clearly more to him than the naïve facade he presented the world at large.

He was so wrapped up in his reluctant appreciation of Potter's scheming, that Draco almost walked straight past his final destination.

The All Purpose Potter Tools building was the single most outstanding feature of Vertik (or any other) Alley. It was a perfect cube in design; seven floors of gleaming metal, glass and other strange Muggle materials that wizards had never used before in the construction of their businesses. It was the largest building built for a single business in Magical Britain. Only the Hogwarts castle and the Ministry offices were larger.

"Ugly monstrosity," muttered Draco, staring up at the building that towered over him.

It had been designed by John Merchant, James Potter's fifth or sixth cousin, and Harry Potter's adoptive father. From the interviews Merchant had given after the building had been opened to the public, the architect had confessed that his work had been heavily influenced by Potter's own creations.

The lights were still on in the atrium; illuminating arrays of geometric decorative panels in perpetual motion, but the rest of the building had been closed for the night. Trying the front doors Draco discovered that while the lights were on, the store was no longer open for business. Without his wand, it would be difficult to enter unobtrusively - if entry was at all possible.

Looking at the large panes of glass that fronted the building, Draco briefly considered trying to break them in order to make his entrance. He discarded the idea almost as quickly as it formed. The meticulously etched and rune encrusted glass had been specially enchanted with more Unbreakable Charms and Shatterproof Spells than most wizards could shake their wands at.

Desperately Draco tried the doors again, this time banging on the glass panels with his fist. Perhaps there was a guard or night watchman on duty. If he could convince any such person to allow him inside...

"Malfoy!"

Draco whirled about, coming face to face with a livid looking Hermione Potter. Her wand was already in hand and levelled towards his chest. Standing just behind Hermione was her mother-in-law, Bobbi Merchant, wife to the Muggle-loving fool who had designed the APPT building. Off to one side was a burly young wizard, Jake Merchant, John and Bobbi's son and Potter's adoptive brother. He too had his wand drawn and aimed at Draco.

Returning to the scene of the crime, eh?" snarled Hermione.

"Granger," hissed Draco, more interested in the fact that Potter's wife was present than the wand she had pointed at his chest. "Where?" he demanded, beginning to stalk towards her. "Where is he? Where's that bastard hiding?!" A nasty looking Blistering Hex splashed off the cobblestones in front of Draco, directing his attention towards Jake Merchant.

"Back off, Malfoy," he cautioned.

Draco sneered at Jake, but stopped his advance on Hermione. He turned back to her and spat at her feet. "The Golden-boy, your precious husband," he reiterated. "Where is he hiding? Tell me!"

It was Bobbi Merchant the replied, "Why don't you tell us?"

"What? Me?" Draco asked incredulously. "I'm not the one doing this! It's all Potter! He's the one behind it all! He's the one that set me up to take all the blame!" Draco jabbed a furious finger at Hermione. "Why don't you ask the mudblood where Potter's hiding? She's his wife - she must know!"

"Don't you dare say that again!" yelled Hermione. "*Lacero tempestas!*"

Shards of brilliant white light exploded from the tip of her wand and swarmed at Draco. He was too close to hope to dodge and the curse was moving too fast. The magical splinters tore into him with a fury, slicing through his robes, his shirt and his trousers with incredible ease. It was a mild curse, this, but it left Draco lying in a heap on the street, blood seeping from dozens of tiny cuts.

The curse had barely finished dissipating when Hermione quickly stomped over to him and swung her leg, putting all of her lithe weight behind a kick to Draco's stomach. The blow briefly lifted Draco into the air, before dropping him back onto the hard cobblestones.

"You son of a bitch!" Hermione spat at him, kicking him repeatedly. "Don't you dare try and pass the blame for all of this onto Harry. It's all your fault, d'you hear me, you evil bastard! Everything that's happened - it's all your fault!"

Bobbi Merchant swept forward to envelope the young witch in a hug, just as Hermione's fury gave way to a torrent of tears. Barely able to breath, thanks to both the curse and Hermione's kicks, Draco continued to lay flat on the ground and stared up at them while trying to catch his breath. Then, to his dismay, two intimidating and familiar figures stepped in between them and Draco. Neville Longbottom and, even worse, Ron Weasley. Both in their Auror robes.

"Jake," asked Neville of the other wizard, gesturing at the two crying witches. "Can you and Bobbi take Hermione home? Try to calm her down."

"Sure," Jake readily agreed. "Will you let us know if you find something?"

"Oh, we'll find something," announced Ron Weasley. "Even if I have to break every bone in his body, have Ginny heal them and then break them all again - we'll find out what this little shit did to Harry."

"I didn't do anything," Draco managed to choke out.

"We have proof that says otherwise," said Neville coldly.

Draco forced himself to sit up and glared at him. "You don't have any proof - because there is no bloody proof!"

Before he could continue, Draco found himself being hoisted up by the front of his shirt. Ron held him up, a look of pure murder on his face, and barked, "Don't lie to us, Malfoy!"

"I'm not lying!" protested Draco, struggling to pull himself loose.

By now a small crowd was beginning to form in the street. Now that Hermione, Bobbi and Jake had left, this left Draco to face the two Aurors and a growing amount of spectators. He even recognised some of the faces, including Colin Creevey's younger brother, Dennis. The mousy wizard looked as if he wanted to tear Draco apart with his bare hands, and probably would have tried, had Ron and Neville not been present.

Just when Draco thought it couldn't get any worse, a small group hurried up to them. This was a problem primarily because the group was being led by Luna Weasley.

"There he is, Ronnie-pooh!" Luna proclaimed loudly, pointing an accusatory finger at Draco. "There he is!"

"Luna... please don't call me that," whined Ron, flushing with embarrassment.

"Oh, right," said Luna apologetically. "Sorry, snookums, I promise I won't call you Ronnie-pooh again."

Ron gave the heavens a disgruntled look. Then he turned his attention back to Draco and set the bleeding wizard down onto his own two feet. Then he drew his wand and jabbed it into Draco's stomach.

"*Laedo!*"

The curse, which delivered a moderately powerful blow (not unlike being hit by a Bludger), sent Draco reeling backward. He collapsed in a heap at Neville's feet, gasping for breath and clutching his much abused middle.

"Draco Malfoy," announced Neville solemnly. "You are under arrest."

Without waiting for a reply, Ron stepped up and forcibly rolled Draco onto his stomach and pulled his arms behind him. He seemed to take great pleasure in digging his knee into the small of Draco's back as he affixed a pair of magic-suppression manacles to his wrists.

"The charges are kidnapping and suspected murder of Harry Potter, the murders of Blaise and Daphne Zabini, the murder of Theodore Nott, and the torture of Colin Creevey under the Cruciatus Curse," concluded Neville as Ron finished restraining him.

"No," objected Draco weakly. "I'm innocent."

"Tell it to the Wizengamot," sneered Ron, pulling him up.

*Ruskbyte*  
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## All Problems Solved (part 2)

A rush of dizziness assailed Draco as he was roughly hauled to his feet.

*The impressive cubic expanse of the All Purpose Potter Tools building stood before them. The framework of metals and glass which fronted the premises gleamed under the light of the alley's streetlamps. The only light coming from within the building was from the atrium, proof that nobody other than the night watchman was inside.*

*"There," pointed Blaise.*

*"I see him," acknowledge Nott, referring to the guard who patrolled the building during the night.*

*"Remember," Draco reminded, "Don't use the Killing Curse. The entire building is warded to detect the use of Dark Arts spells."*

*"I know, I know," Nott grumbled, unhappy that he would not get a chance to slake his thirsty for killing. "We stun the guard, bind him and lock him up in the broom cupboard."*

*"He'll be checking the despatch office in a minute," noted Blaise. He had been observing the guard's patrol route for the past week. Everything the man did had been timed to the second and noted down. "We'll have three minutes before he comes out again."*

*"Let's go," urged Draco.*

*The trio scurried across the alley street to the front doors of APPT. Nott took watch, keeping an eye out for anybody that might stumble upon them, while Draco and Blaise worked together to circumvent the assorted security spells and locks that sealed the building's entrance.*

*"Two minutes left," counted off Nott.*

*Their wands in constant motion, Draco and Blaise almost completely ignored their companion. The locks they were working to deactivate were not the most difficult that could be found in the wizarding world, but they were tricky and required their full concentration.*

*"One minute," hissed Nott, beginning to grow worried that they might fail.*

*"Got it," announced Blaise as the doors clicked and swung open.*

*"Move, quickly," urged Draco, shoving Blaise inside.*

*Once they were all inside, Draco closed the doors behind them and the three hurried across the lobby of the building, making a wild dash to the doorway leading through to the despatch office. Ducking to either side of the door, they held their breaths in expectation as they listened. The echoing click of the guard's footsteps announced his return and they lifted their wands to the ready. The door swung inwards and a figure stepped out.*

*"Stupefy," whispered Draco as the guard crossed his field of vision. The spell hit the man on the temple, perfectly aimed, and left him unconscious without any struggle.*

*"Incarcerous," muttered Nott, quickly binding the guard in several lengths of thick rope. He then grabbed the man by the back of his shirt and dragged him to the broom cupboard near the public restrooms.*

*"Exactly as planned," crowed Blaise once they were finished.*

*"The vault's on the top floor," Draco reminded them as they crossed to the staircase. The two elevators that normally serviced the building were shut down during the night and could not be reactivated without drawing undue attention.*

*Carefully, lest they accidentally stumble over a Security Charm not detailed in the building's plans, the three wizards began to climb the stairs. The object of their long quest lay ahead of them, hidden away within a secret chamber at the back of Harry Potter's office. Soon, it would be in their grasp...*

-oOo-

### *St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries*

Draco returned to consciousness in much the same manner as last two visits to the wizarding hospital. That is; with great pain searing its way through his skull while the rest of him felt as though it had been a wrestling match with Hagrid.

After staring at what was rapidly becoming a familiar ceiling, Draco tried to rise, but himself unable to do so. He quickly discovered that he was strapped down on the bed. Thick leather restraints were wrapped around his wrists and ankles, pinning him firmly in place.

He looked around the room, but found it empty and bare. The only thing of interest was a large poster pinned to the wall opposite his bed. It was a labelled diagram of a human body, clearly of Muggle origin. Staring at it in disdain, Draco suddenly jerked by, as he could have sworn the poster had flickered into an image of Pinhead. A second, more thorough examination revealed that this was not so. Clearly his taxed and over-stressed mind was starting to play cruel tricks on him.

Several minutes passed in silence and Draco began to wonder where everyone was. His last clear memory was of Weasley and Longbottom dragging him away from APPT. He had expected to wake up in a Ministry holding cell, not a hospital bed. Perhaps this was similar to what had happened when he had sex with Daphne, where he had apparently Splinched himself instead.

"Hey!" he called. "Hey! Somebody let me out of here!"

With a creak, the door swung open. Draco's relief was short lived, however, as Neville Longbottom calmly stepped into the room and took up a position beside the single bed.

"Awake at least, hmm?" he observed sombrely. "Good. There are some questions I'd like answers to."

"Same here!" snapped Draco angrily. "What the Hell d'you think you and Weasel are playing at?! Take these damned belts off and let me go!"

"Getting angry like this won't help your case, Draco," said Neville.

"What case?" demanded Draco. "I haven't done anything! Anything! You know that!"

Neville shook his head, perhaps in sympathy, but most likely in disappointment. "What I know, Draco, is that Harry Potter is missing, as is your wife, Pansy. What I know is that Blaise Zabini was savaged worse than a werewolf's victim. What I know is that several eye-witnesses saw you bash Theodore Nott's head into a bloody pulp. What I know is that, so far, everything points to you as the one responsible."

"Damn you, you bastard! I didn't do it! It's a setup! All a setup, by that bloody sonuvabitch Potter!" roared Draco, now thrashing violently against the bindings holding him.

"I somewhat doubt that Harry is responsible for you grinding Nott's skull into the ground," noted Neville coolly. He took out his notebook and pen, and began to scribble something down. By the time he was done, Draco had fallen limp on the bed, exhausted by his struggles for freedom. "A Ministry sanctioned solicitor will be here soon, if you'd like to confess. It might spare you the Kiss, though I can't imagine you getting out of a life sentence in Azkaban."

"I'm innocent!" insisted Draco, breathing deeply.

"That's for the court to decide," said Neville.

They remained like this for an indeterminate length of time. Occasionally Neville would ask a question, or prod Draco to give a confession, but Draco ignored him. He discretely tugged and pulled on his bonds, but they were perfectly secure and doubtless reinforced with magic. Without a wand, he had no hope of escaping.

Finally the tedium was broken by a knock on the door.

"Yes?" asked Neville, not removing his attention from Draco.

The door cracked open several inches and Colin Creevey stuck his head through the narrow gap. He glanced briefly at Draco before turning to Neville. "The solicitor's here, sir," he reported quietly.

"Thanks, Colin," acknowledged Neville. "I'll be right out."

With a nod, Colin withdrew and closed the door behind him. Draco stared in shock, not moving or blinking even after a full minute had passed. What he had just seen was impossible.

Colin Creevey was supposed to be lying insensate in a hospital bed, his mind completely destroyed by over-exposure to the Cruciatus Curse. Draco had been the one to do it, and had even seen the young wizard during his previous two visits to St. Mungo's. But somehow Colin was up and about... and dressed in Auror robes.

This made even less sense, as Colin was a well known photographer for the *Daily Prophet*. The only explanation was that he had been working undercover for some reason. But undercover for the newspaper... or the Aurors? Draco's eyes narrowed at this realization. He began to wonder just how deep the conspiracy against him ran.

"So the Aurors are in on this as well, eh?" he sneered at Neville.

"If we were, Malfoy," Neville assured him, "you would not be alive to make such an accusation."

"A delightful sentiment. One shared by most of the staff here, as well," noted Ginny, who had just opened the door and stepped inside. After briefly nodding to her husband, she began to give Draco a cursory inspection.

"Will you be long?" asked Neville.

"A few minutes," Ginny told him. "I'll be done by the time you've spoken to the solicitor."

"Be careful," Neville warned as he stepped outside.

Ginny waited until the door was closed and then turned a malicious glare towards Draco. He had a sudden feeling that he would not enjoy whatever happened next.

*"Silencio!"*

Once the spell had settled, Draco was left mute and unable to protest. He could only think of two reasons why Ginny would cast a Silencing Charm on him. The first was that she wanted to yell at him without interruption. The second...

Ginny leaned over him, grabbing him by the jaw and forcing him to meet her furious gaze. "Remember what I told you about the third time being the charm?" she asked. She brought her wand into view and jabbed it roughly against Draco's forehead, causing pain to stab through his skull. "Burn, you miserable bastard, burn!"

Blistering heat erupted where her wand was pressed against Draco's skin and he began to silently shriek in agony. This was a torture that went beyond anything he had ever experienced, but Ginny's firm hold on his head prevented him from escaping her ministrations. The sickly smell of burning flesh filled the air and Draco's consciousness began to leave him.

Then, relief. Draco collapsed like a limp doll, gasping for breath, his clothes soaked with sweat and his body quivering weakly. Ginny stepped back and regarded her handiwork with a critical eye. "Not bad. Not bad at all," she concluded. "It actually suits you. Have a look."

A brief flick of her wand conjured a small hand mirror, which she held up to his face. Draco was too far gone to pay much attention, but a dig to his ribs by Ginny's wand forced him to focus on the mirror. Sweat and tears stung his eyes, making it difficult to focus, but he could make out a line of charred flesh marring his once flawless features.

He tried to speak, to ask what she had done to him, but the Silencing Charm stopped his words. Slowly his vision began to clear and Draco found himself staring in horror at the jagged burn that stabbed its way down from his hairline to just above his right eyebrow. It was a crudely forged replica of Potter's infamous lightning bolt scar.

"I hope you found that as pleasurable as I did," said Ginny, Vanishing the mirror and casting a quick spell to clear away the burnt smell that filled the room. With another wave she released the Silencing Charm and smiled benevolently down at him, as if waiting for him to thank her for her efforts.

Draco opened his mouth, to deliver the most scathing retort he could manage, but the words stuck in his throat. He became acutely aware of the fact that Ginny's wand was still in her hand. Ready to be used again. There was also a strange gleam in her eyes. The look of someone waiting in eager anticipation.

"Oh, I've left you speechless at my generosity," cooed Ginny, as Draco's mouth snapped shut. Her smile was a thin and predatory one. "Don't worry; the expression on your face is truly thanks enough."

"S-suh-sol-licitor," Draco gasped, barely able to form the word.

Ginny seemed to consider this. Finally she nodded and agreed, "Yes, I suppose we're done here. I'll just pop outside then and let them know you're ready."

With a satisfied bounce in her step, Ginny exited the room. It was not until the door had swung closed that Draco allowed himself to relax. Even then, his body was wracked with pain and it was all he could do not to break down and cry. It was only his pride, as a Malfoy and a pureblood, which forced him to keep on fighting.

"Ah, Draco," a cultivated voice announced, "I see the Healer is finished with you."

The voice was intimately familiar and one he had expected to never hear again. Draco's head snapped up from where it had fallen on the pillow and he stared in disbelief at the man standing in the doorway.

"F-Fuh-Father?"

Lucius Everard Malfoy, missing and presumed dead since the defeat of Voldemort ten years ago, stared coolly back at his flabbergasted only son and heir. He was dressed in smart and well cut robes, his hair was carefully coifed and his cold grey eyes showed no care for Draco's ills. He did not appear to have aged a day.

"Come, Draco," Lucius commanded, waving his wand hand over the bed. "All will be explained shortly."

The straps holding Draco in place ratcheted loose and fell to the sides, allowing Draco to rise. He rolled onto his side and then into a sitting position. His eyes did not stray from the focus of their attention, nor did his face free itself from its dumbstruck expression.

"Father?" asked Draco again. "How? You... you're here... now..."

"It's a long story, Draco, and you will hear it soon enough," Lucius explained, a hint of impatience creeping into his voice. He waved for Draco to rise to his feet. "Come. There are people that wish to speak with you, and it would not be wise to keep them waiting overlong."

"Who? Who wants to talk to me?" Draco asked, doing as Lucius bade him. "And why?"

"That you will find out when you meet them," said Lucius.

Lucius stepped out of the room, obviously expecting Draco to follow. Doing so, Draco abruptly found himself flanked on either side by Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom. The two Aurors grabbed him by the shoulders and began to drag him after the retreating form of his father.

"Hey! Let go!" protested Draco. "I can walk for myself, dammit!"



Quiet!" snarled Ron, tightening his grip and forcing Draco forward.

"This is for your own good, Draco," said Neville, walking sedately in comparison to his partner's angry stomping. Both he and Ron seemed completely at ease with the presence of Lucius, despite their history with the man.

"Where are you taking me?" demanded Draco.

"To the Ministry, for your trial," barked Ron. "Where else?"

They progressed quickly down the corridor to where Lucius was waiting by the lifts. It was a short wait before one set of doors slid open. Draco was herded into the lift first, his guards keeping a firm hold on him. Lucius entered last, pushing the button that would take them to the ground floor.

The trip down to the lobby seemed to take an age, especially as Ron spent most of his time alternately glaring and then growling at Draco. Neville and Lucius, in contrast, waited patiently for the lift to reach their destination. When they finally arrived, they found the lobby to be deserted, save for an impossibly sane and healthy Colin Creevey.

"There you are," he said, hurrying over to join them.

"My son was feeling... tardy," explained Lucius.

Colin gave an unconcerned shrug and then held out a somewhat mangled-looking wire coat hanger. "Here's our Portkey to the Ministry," he told them. "Just grab on and we'll be off."

Neville and Ron tightened their grips on Draco's arms and grabbed hold of the hanger with their free hands. They waited a moment before Lucius joined them and Portkey activated. The ride was, as always, wild and twisting. It ended with a jolt as the group landed in the atrium of Ministry.

"Right on time, gentlemen," announced Remus Lupin.

The grey-haired werewolf, who had in recent years grown a neat beard, stepped up to greet them. Past Ministry laws made it difficult for werewolves to hold down sanctioned jobs in the Ministry. The fall of Voldemort, however, had brought a shift in the Ministry that finally allowed the more moderate purebloods to come into power. Lupin was one of the first of the so-called dark creatures that had been hired by the Ministry as part of their campaign for equal rights and liberties.

If Draco hadn't been half-dead from pain and exhaustion, he would have directed a sneer of scathing disdain at his former teacher. As it stood, all he was able to muster was a weak twist of his lips.

"Thanks, Professor," acknowledged Neville.

"I'm never going to escape that title, am I?" asked Lupin rhetorically.

"Of course not," affirmed Ron. He then turned to business and asked, "Courtroom Ten?"

Lupin nodded and said, "You know the way."

Ron bobbed his head and began to drag Draco after him. The pace he and Neville set was a fast one and Draco was hard pressed to keep up. Whenever he fell behind or stumbled, the Aurors would slow only long enough for him to regain his feet before resuming their trek through the Ministry's corridors. Lucius followed silently at a sedate and measured pace.

It was an ominous turn that they bypassed the usual checkpoints and used the stairs, rather than the more public lifts. Draco had a feeling that it was not by chance that his arrival at the Ministry was being carefully monitored so that only a few select persons were aware of his presence. This would make it far easier and simpler for his enemies to make him mysteriously disappear.

The journey to the courtroom did not take long. All too quickly the small party had arrived at the corridor, stone walls and torch lined, which led to the thick wooden doors of Ministry's darkest and most foreboding courtroom. Stopping briefly outside, Neville released his hold on Draco's arm long enough to twist the heavy iron handle and push the door open.

Draco's breath caught in his throat as he was forcefully pulled into the large, dungeon-like room. The walls were dark, rough-hewn stone, which rose up to a ceiling that was lost in darkness. Wooden benches lined the room on three sides and rose up several levels.

This was where many of the Death Eater trials had been held after the first war. It was where Harry Potter had been tried for casting a Patronus to defend himself from Ministry-controlled Dementors. Where what few surviving Death Eaters, and other dark sympathisers, had been tried after the second war.

The memories of those dreadful few hours, where Draco himself had once been charged for his part in letting Voldemort and his servants into Hogwarts, came rushing back. He gasped at as the cold memories assailed him and he only then noticed the source of this effect. Flanking the doors to the courtroom, and scattered along the walls, were the tall and black robed figures of the Dementors of Azkaban.

"Sit down!" barked Ron, pushing Draco sharply between the shoulders.

Staggering forward on unsteady feet, Draco sank into the chair set in the middle of the room. The chill of the Dementors, not to mention the agony of the wound Ginny had inflicted, left him barely able to support himself. He had barely settled in his seat when thick steel chains snapped around his wrists and ankles, trapping him in place.

Draco Malfoy," intoned a cold female voice from somewhere in the shadows. "Do you know why you're here?"

"I've been set up! Framed!" answered Draco.

"Oh? How so and by whom?"

"Perfect Potter and his friends!" Draco explained bitterly. "They arranged it all. Potter's disappearance - which allowed him the chance to move about freely to do whatever he wanted. Getting rid of all my people in the Ministry. Killing Blaise, probably to find out what he knew, and then setting me up to take the blame for Daphne... oh Merlin, did you see what they did to Daphne? Did you?!"

"And why," the voice asked, "would they go to all this trouble?"

"Potter hates me," said Draco simply.

A pair of torches, at the very back of the courtroom burst into flame. The flickering light illuminated the single figure that was sitting there, revealing the identity of Draco's questioner. She sat regally in the place reserved for the judge, her plum-coloured Wizengamot robes looking more like a deep crimson in the subdued torchlight.

"Granger?" asked Draco in dismay. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"What does it look like, Malfoy?" countered Hermione coldly.

"No... no!" Draco protested.

"Mrs Potter is your judge, Draco," said Lucius, who had at some point moved to stand next to Draco.

"And jury," Hermione added.

"No! Impossible!"

"Who better to condemn you, Malfoy?"

"You can't! You won't!" yelled Draco, struggling futilely against his binds. His efforts only caused the chains to ratchet and tighten their hold on him. "This is a farce! A miscarriage of justice!"

"And what makes you say that?" asked Hermione.

"Because it's just you!" Draco spat. "You and your accomplices!"

Hermione arched an eyebrow and tilted her head to one side. She gave the impression of being honestly puzzled by why Draco would be making such a protest. "And the problem with that is...?"

Draco searched for a reasonable excuse, a way out. He quickly found one, the most obvious one at that, and promptly shouted it out as if his life depended on it. And it probably did at that. "You can't put me on trial if the full Wizengamot isn't here!"

"Why not? Sirius Black was sent to Azkaban without a trial," countered Hermione in a reasonably tone of voice.

"It's against the law!" Draco shrieked.

"Really, Draco," chided his father, shaking his head in disappointment. "Did nothing I teach you actually sink into your amazingly dim-witted skull?"

"It's against the law!" Draco repeated petulantly. It was now obvious that the man standing beside him was not really his father. Despite his cold attitude, Lucius Malfoy would never have stood by like this while his son was being put through such a charade. Clearly he was an impostor, probably using Polyjuice Potion or something similar.

"That never stopped anyone before," said Hermione.

"It'll stop you!" screamed Draco, not entirely desperate. "I know you, Granger! I know you! You always follow the rules! You obey the law!"

"Ah, but this has nothing to do with the *law*, Malfoy."

"What?"

Hermione then did something that Draco had not imagine her capable of. She smirked at him, in a manner not unlike his own expressions of smug superiority.

"Lucius was incorrect. I'm not your judge, Malfoy."

"You're not?" asked Draco, wondering what that meant.

"No, because this isn't a trial."

Draco could feel the blood drain from his face at this tacit acknowledgement of his suspicions. Potter and his friends had not brought him here under any kind of official authority. No, they had brought him here to face their own private brand of justice.

Licking his lips, afraid that he already knew the answer, he asked, "Then what is all this?"

Hermione smiled; the smile of someone who knows a secret.

"This, Draco, is your coup de théâtre."

*"A coup d'état, that's what this'll be," crowed Nott. "Potter won't know what hit him."*

*Draco and his two compatriots had encountered very little difficulty in reaching the seventh floor of All Purpose Potter Tools. As the plans had indicated, there were next to no security features anywhere inside the building. Once they had slipped past the perimeter wards and night guard, there had been nothing to stop them.*

*Now, all that stood between them and their goal was the combination-locked door to the vault in Potter's office. It was more secure than the building had been, but was a paltry last line of defence when compared against similar doors, like those found in the catacombs of Gringotts.*

*After nearly half an hour's work, Blaise and Draco were nearly done unravelling the wards that protected the door, while Nott stood guard at the office's entrance.*

"So, Draco," said Nott as flashes of magic coruscated across the vault door, "what's the first thing you're going to do after we kill Potter?"

"Have a bit of fun with his wife," replied Draco. "If she isn't as pathetic as it as I imagine; I might not kill her right away afterwards."

Nott grimace in distaste. "Granger?" he asked, "Why'd you want to shag a mudblood like her?"

Draco sneered and answered, "Because I want to complete her humiliation by making sure she knows her true place in the world, before I send her to join Potter in the afterlife."

"Still... a mudblood..."

"There," said Blaise, interrupting.

*A sharp crackling, like bacon on a skillet, sounded as waves of shimmering light filled the darkness of the office. As the vault wards collapsed, there was the ratchet-like click of bolts retracting. A thin crack of black appeared at the door's edge as it swung open a fraction.*

*Eager hands grabbed the handle and pulled the door wide open, revealing the contents stored within. The vault's interior was not particularly large, barely eight feet wide by fifteen feet deep. The walls were lined with neat wooden shelves, upon which were stored all manner of items and documents.*

*But it was the round stone pedestal at the very back, a foot across and reaching up to waist height, which immediately caught and held the attention of the three thieves. A shaft of light fell from the ceiling and bathed what rested atop the display in a soft, almost ethereal glow.*

*It was a box. A perfect cube, roughly three inches on a side. At first glance it seemed to be made from a dark wood, with bronze or copper inlays, but this was not the case. Closer inspection, as they crowded round the pedestal, revealed that the box had been exquisitely crafted from dozens of different materials. Ebony contrasted against silver and gold against cherry, the pieces fitting together in an intricate puzzle under a final coat of black lacquer.*

*Reaching out with a tremulous hand, Draco plucked the box from its place on the pedestal. Its weight was less than he expected, as if it weren't really there. He held it reverently at first, almost unable to believe that his plans had come to fruition so easily.*

"At last," he whispered to himself. "Power beyond imagination. In the palm of my hand."

The jolt back to reality was the sharpest it had ever been, like a slap to Draco's face. He staggered under the onslaught and reached out blindly with one hand for something to support himself with. He did not find anything and almost lost his balance as a result.

It took a moment before he realized that he was no longer bound and chained to the courtroom's interrogation chair. How he had come to be free he could not remember, but he had a feeling that whatever had happened would not be to his advantage.

Then comprehension of what he had just remembered began to parse its way through his consciousness.

"Father? Granger?" he called.

No reply came.

Draco looked up, searching for Lucius, and found that his father was no longer present. For some reason he could not find it in himself to be surprised by this. What did surprise him, however, was the fact that the wooden doors leading into the courtroom had also disappeared. So, for that matter, had the courtroom itself. Everything, from the benches to the walls, had been swallowed by what seemed to be solid shadow. Even the austere figure of Hermione Potter. He was trapped.

An all consuming black void now surrounded him. He had the vague sense, more an impression really, that the space he now occupied did not have any boundaries. The walls of the courtroom were not simply hidden from view. They were gone entirely.

Then a great bell rang out.

It repeated; a steady and sombre tolling that seemed to issue from the very depths of Hell itself. As if heralded by the bell, a wall of unholy light speared through the darkness. It had no discernable source, but flickered and writhed about like a living thing that struggled against some malevolent power. What really caught Draco's attention, however, was the tall and regal figure that emerged from this display.

"So, at last we come to the end of this little drama."

Draco took a fearful step back, recognising his companion.

"You."

"Please," said Pinhead. "Don't say you were expecting someone else."

-oOo-

*Somewhere, somewhen*

Pinhead stood, with grave majesty and immortal patience, waiting for Draco to speak. But the last of the Malfoy bloodline remained frozen in place. It was an instinctive reaction, that of an animal faced with a predator and growing still in the hopes that it might avoid detection.

"It would seem, Draco, that your search for answers is finally complete," prompted the demon after several minutes had passed in expectant silence.

"Who - who are you?" Draco finally managed to stutter.

"I have been given many names. Many titles," replied Pinhead. "None can describe me fully."

"What are you?" asked Draco.

"A seeker of experience. Pleasure. Pain. The limits of both."

"Why are you here? What do you want from me?" demanded Draco, his voice breaking towards the end.

"And still you do not understand," concluded Pinhead, a hint of disappointment flickering in his implacable black eyes. He turned away from Draco, presenting his profile to the frantic wizard. "Despite all our clues, all our hints," he continued, "you still do not remember. How disappointing."

"Please," Draco begged weakly. "Please, I didn't do anything. I didn't."

"Oh, but you did," Pinhead corrected. "Let me show you."

/oOo\

*Late August, 2006*

*Malfoy Manor*

"Would you like a drink, dear?" asked Pansy Malfoy, as she and Draco retired to their living room after finishing the sumptuous five-course meal Keebler had provided for dinner.

"Yeah," said Draco, the question having barely registered. He seldom bothered to pay any more attention to his wife than was absolutely necessary. Pansy's simpering manner had long since lost its appeal.

"Brandy?" asked Pansy, crossing to the drinks cabinet.

"Yeah," repeated Draco.

"You sound as though you really need it," observed Pansy as she placed a pair of tumblers on the counter and reached for the appropriate bottle.

"Potter," Draco grumbled by way of reply, sinking into his armchair and staring out the window opposite. He glared sourly into the night, his temperament dark enough to almost match the blackness outside. It had been a long and tedious day. Something that seemed all too frequent an occurrence.

Pansy poured a generous measure of liquor into both tumblers. Setting the bottle down, she glanced over her shoulder and confirmed that her husband was preoccupied. Making sure that her actions were concealed by her body, she withdrew a small crystal phial from where it was nestled in her cleavage. Carefully removing the cork, she dribbled its contents into the glass that she intended to give to Draco.

Returning the phial to its place between her breasts, Pansy dipped her index finger into Draco's drink and gave a quick swirl to ensure that the potion mixed in properly with the brandy. It would not do to have her plans undone by its bitter aftertaste. Pasting a smile on her face, she picked up the tumblers and turned away from the cabinet.

"What's he done now?" she asked, handing Draco the tainted drink and then perching herself on the armrest of his chair.

The next few minutes were spent listening to Draco's oft repeated complaints about Harry Potter, the state of wizarding society and the world in

general. It was a rant that Pansy had become very familiar with over the years she had been married to Draco. He went off like this at least once a week.

Seeing that Draco had finished his drink, and the potion mixed into it, Pansy claimed his empty glass and went to pour a second helping of brandy. As she stood by the liquor cabinet, she made a seemingly casual observation.

"You know; if Potter's really as weak as you say he is--"

"He is!" insisted Draco.

"Then he must have had some sort of help to defeat the Dark Lord," finished Pansy, ignoring the interruption.

"Slytherin's balls, you stupid woman," muttered Draco. "Why do you have to always state the blindingly obvious as if it were a revelation of biblical proportions?"

"Well," Pansy continued, gritting her teeth and doing a remarkable job of keeping her cool, "I was thinking--"

"That's a first," Draco muttered.

Clearly resisting the urge to throw caution to the wind and simply kill Draco there and then, Pansy forced herself to remain calm. "What if you could get your hands on it, whatever it is," she said, "and used it against him?"

Draco turned to sneer at her, obviously preparing to dismiss her suggestion, but paused just as he began to speak. After a few seconds, he closed his mouth and began to look thoughtful.

"You know," he mused, "that might not be such a bad idea."

\oOo/

*Somewhere, sometime*

Draco blinked rapidly as the memory receded. The pain in his head was only a dull throbbing, in contrast to the much sharper stabbing sensation of before. He had a feeling that this muting effect was deliberate, so that while he would still be in pain it would not be enough to completely distract him.

He stared across at Pinhead, who was watching him with a terrible detachment.

"What was that?" he asked.

"The beginning."

Draco shook his head, struggling to order his thoughts. His mind was darting about without rhyme or reason, but he did manage to focus on one particular image. "She put something in my drink..."

"A Susceptibility Potion. To ensure your ready acceptance of her suggestion. To make certain you would begin searching for the box," elaborated Pinhead. "Simple, but effective."

"No. Pansy is my wife, she'd never betray me," Draco countered. He had become so used to Pansy obeying his every whim that the idea of her acting contrary to his interests was completely foreign. "And even if she tried - she's too stupid to pull it off."

"Ah, but who is the betrayer and who is the betrayed?" asked Pinhead knowingly. There was a cold satisfaction reflected in his black eyes as he spoke. "Pansy is not as stupid, nor as oblivious, as you would think."

"What d'you mean?" demanded Draco.

Pinhead's reply was a succinct, "Daphne Zabini."

Draco felt himself grow pale at the mention of his lover's name.

"She knows?"

"Nothing arouses a woman's fury better than infidelity," Pinhead lectured dispassionately. "And no mercy will be shown when revenge is taken for such a betrayal."

"But how?" asked Draco, still having trouble accepting this revelation. "I made sure--"

"You are not as subtle, nor as cunning, as you like to believe, Draco," Pinhead informed him, his words laced with just a bare hint of mocking scorn. "Pansy is a far more admirable example of what it means to be a Slytherin. While you busied yourself in preparation to destroy your enemy, she laid down the groundwork for your own destruction. And when the final hour came... she struck."

/oOo\

23:45, April 13th, 2007

Draco smirked with a growing sense of satisfaction and mounting anticipation. At last his plans were complete. The box, Dark Arts Artefact Number One-One-Three-Eight, was finally in his possession. Over two dozen of his closest associates and companions were gathered together at his manor, most of them his old schoolmates. They had come in preparation for an event that would shake the foundations of the wizarding world. The final annihilation of Draco's long-time rival; Harry Potter.

For the first time in a decade; life, for Draco Malfoy, was good.

Glancing over what would become the core of his future cohorts; Draco had to admit that he could have done better. He could also have done a lot worse. But if anyone could shape them into a devastating force of Pure-blooded might, it would be him. He was a Malfoy after all. Voldemort had, before anything else, been a compelling and charismatic leader. Which was why Draco would be the perfect replacement for him.

They were assembled in the manor's ballroom, which had not seen any significant use since Draco's graduation from Hogwarts. At the far end of the massive room, a stone pedestal had been conjured. There, atop a plush green velvet cushion, rested the box. Arrayed around the pedestal, watching as their future allies mingled, Draco, Blaise and Nott waited impatiently.

"Don't look so morbid, Blaise," Draco chided his friend. "Lady luck is smiling upon us this night."

"Then we should act now, before she starts to frown," replied Blaise curtly.

Draco rolled his eyes and shared a bemused glance with Nott. Zabini had been growing steadily more nervous ever since the trio had fled from the All Purpose Potter Tools building. The man was simply unable to enjoy the sweet taste of victory without having something to worry about. That was probably why Daphne, currently discussing some juicy piece of gossip with her younger sister Astoria, in Draco's bed rather than her husband's.

"You're such a stick in the mud, Zabini," said Nott.

"Yeah, try to enjoy yourself for once," added Draco.

"Your problem, Malfoy, is that you think the world revolves around you."

He looked at Blaise in mock astonishment. "You mean it doesn't?"

Blaise glowered at him and affirmed, "No, it doesn't."

"Well," said Draco blithely, "by sunrise rather I expect it shall."

"You're delusional," muttered Blaise unhappily. "Let's just get this over with. It's almost midnight."

"Right," Draco agreed.

Stepping away from his two conspirators, Draco moved in front of the pedestal and clapped his hands to gain the attention of his guests. It took a minute for all the varied conversations to die down, but soon all was quiet. Using his best narrator's voice, Draco began to recite the speech he had carefully prepared for this event. It was a rousing commentary, painstakingly designed to play on the needs and desires of the audience. He spoke of Voldemort's rise and the glory days of his reign. He spoke of Potter's interference and the Dark Lord's ignoble downfall. He revealed the truth behind events a decade past, of the dark artefact that Potter had made and unleashed upon Voldemort. And he unveiled the puzzle box, sitting on its pedestal behind him.

He completely failed to notice as his wife, Pansy, quietly left the room.

Leaving the ballroom behind her, she briskly made her way to the Malfoy's private drawing room. She paused by the mantle and looked at the single photograph that resided above the fireplace. It was a picture of Pansy and Draco on their wedding day. It was also the only photograph to be found in the entire manor, where husband and wife could be seen together. She brushed a melancholy finger over the image.

"Goodbye, Draco," she muttered, sadly and bitterly, before tossing a handful of floo powder onto the fire. As the flames flared bright green, she stepped into the fireplace and called out, "Martyr Warren."

The world spun around her as Pansy was sent rocketing through the floo network. After a minute of stomach churning bends and twists, she found herself disgorged in the sitting room of her destination. Martyr Warren was a mid-sized but very comfortable cottage, out in the Devon countryside. Dusting herself off, Pansy looked up to see that her best friend, dating back to before Hogwarts even, had been awaiting her arrival.

"So, it's started?" asked Millicent Bulstrode, not moving from her seat.

"Yeah," Pansy reluctantly confirmed. "Thanks for letting me use your cottage as a stop over, Milly."

"It's no trouble," said Millicent, shrugging off the appreciation. She nursed a tall glass of gillywater in her hands and asked, "Still, why come to me and not Blaise? Daphne's his wife, after all."

"And if he had bedded her more often, she might not have strayed!" snapped Pansy, her blood boiling at the mere mention of Daphne's name.

A long moment of slightly awkward silence passed and then Millicent staidly observed, "It's getting close to midnight. You'd better hurry."

Pansy bit off the apology she had been considering and merely nodded. "Right." Finding and using her host's supply of floo powder, she knelt down

next to the fireplace and stuck her head in the green flames. "Madingley Grange!"

Once again the world spun widely around Pansy, though this time her body remained firmly in Millicent's sitting room. With a cough, she found herself looking out at a warmly lit and nicely furnished lounge, where the wands of Harry and Hermione Potter, Neville and Ginny Longbottom and Ron Weasley were aimed at her face. Luna Weasley was also present, but was merely watching proceedings with her usual detachment.

"Get those wands out of my face," she commanded indignantly.

"Pansy," said Harry, the first to lower his wand arm, which prompted the others to do the same. "Well, well, well. And what, I wonder, brings you to the Potter fireplace so late in the night?"

"I need to speak to you," said Pansy. "Can I come through?"

"Speak to us? About what?" asked Hermione, wand still in hand.

"The misbegotten, cheating bastard that dares call himself my husband," Pansy told them, her expression twisting unhappily.

"Ugh, Malfoy? Who wants to talk about *him* of all people?" complained Ron.

Impatient at the delay, Pansy snappishly asked, "Can I come through now or should I just wait until tomorrow?"

The group exchanged looks, communicating silently in a way that the Slytherin within Pansy could not help but admire. After a few curt gestures and a subtle adjustment in their positions about the room (to better deal with a hostile visitor), Harry nodded to her.

"If you think it's important enough for you to disturb us like this... come on over."

\oOo/

*Somewhere, somewhen*

"This was the essence of Pansy's plan," explained Pinhead. "Drawing you to your doom without casting any suspicion upon herself."

"But why go to Potter? Why him? Why then?" Draco demanded to know. "If she was going to betray me, why wait until only *after* I'd stolen the box? Why not before, so that Potter and his friends could catch me in the act?"

Pinhead answered as if speaking to a child. "Why? Because, Draco, she needed an alibi."

Draco blinked dumbly and repeated, "An alibi?"

Seeing that his victim was simply unable to make the appropriate connection, Pinhead began to explain. "Yes, an alibi to confirm that she was nowhere near Malfoy Manor when you and your comrades were taken. And what better defence could she boast than to have Harry Potter, hero of the magical world, vouch for her whereabouts?"

The crafty simplicity of his wife's scheme left Draco dumbstruck. Moving for the first time since his appearance, Pinhead walked up to him. He reached out with one hand and removed an old, yellowed business card from Draco's breast pocket. He flicked it round so that Draco could read the words printed on it.

## **ALL PROBLEMS SOLVED**

The Prince of Pain's face remained studiously blank, but there was a ghostly hint of dark humour surrounding him. He released his hold on the business card and let it fall to the stone floor. Draco's eyes could not help but track it on its way down. When he looked up, he found that Pinhead had retreated to a more comfortable distance.

"While ignorant of the true nature of the box, Pansy was the perfect conduit for our machinations," Pinhead explained, "Angry. Bitter. Jealous. Exactly what was needed to lead you onto the right path."

"You used her," was all Draco could think to say.

"Perhaps, but if not the box then she would still have done something to avenge herself upon you."

Draco took a step back, more a reflex action than anything else. Pinhead, however, reacted instantly to the perceived attempt to flee. With a nod of his head, a dozen gleaming chains shot out of the darkness surrounding them. Each length of chain ended in a serrated hook that tore deep into Draco's flesh as they latched onto him.

The pain was incredible, more than he could have imagined, as the hooks dug into him. His hands, his elbows, his ankles, his knees, his chest, his back and even his cheeks; the chains bound him so tightly that he could not move for fear of more pain. There was a ratcheting noise and the pain blossomed through Draco again as the chains hoisted him six inches into the air. He was completely immobilised.

"Now now," Pinhead reprimanded. "You can't leave just yet, Draco. The story's not over."

/oOo\

*Midnight, April 13th, 2007*

## *Malfoy Manor*

The clock was striking the tolls of midnight.

Draco had been working furiously for the past five minutes, all of his attention focused on solving the puzzle of the box. He had begun to work on the problem after finishing his earlier speech. It had been well received, a smattering of applause and words of agreement and encouragement from everyone present. There had been some argument over who would open the box first, but the Malfoy influence was still enough for him to argue his way to victory.

Fragments of a soft tune had started to play almost immediately, when he had brushed his thumb counter-clockwise over the largest circle embedded in the centre of what seemed to be the box's primary face. As each part of the puzzle was completed, the haunting piece of music grew closer to completion. An entire section of the box extended outward, spun round its axis and then sunk back into place. Something about the arrangement had changed, but it was hard to tell exactly what.

His heart was pounding in his chest as, piece by piece, he progressed further along. It was difficult at times; the gleaming lacquer work was so finely applied that the seams between segments could not be seen by the eye, forcing him to rely on his sense of touch. Turning it this way and that, searching for the next change to make, Draco could see his reflection as the light reflected over the box's surfaces. It was impossible, but alongside his own face he could see the faces everyone in the ballroom else as well.

To his elation the box seemed to almost pull part in his hands, large segments of its construction flipping and twisting round. His breath caught in his throat as one face seemed to fall away and recede into infinity. It was an optical illusion, but the effect was heart stopping. The tinkling melody was almost finished, he could tell, though beneath the soft chimes Draco could hear something akin to the weak cry of a baby.

Then the box bucked in his hands.

Jerking with surprise, Draco dropped the box to the ballroom floor. He slowly backed away as the fine filigree of metal and the underlying parts began to move, seemingly with a will of their own. The music that was playing reached a crescendo, the tune finally complete. Lights throughout Malfoy Manor began to flicker as one face of the Lament Configuration peeled open, allowing a stream of brilliant light to pour out of it.

A mournful bell rang in the sudden silence.

\oOo/

*Somewhere, somewhen*

Draco blinked and shivered as he heard that same bell ringing through the darkness surrounding him. The sound seemed to come from all sides. He looked despairingly at his captor, who stared back at him with an expression of ultimate satisfaction.

"And that, as they say... was that," concluded Pinhead. "You opened the box. We came."

/oOo\

*Midnight, April 13th, 2007*

## *Malfoy Manor*

The ballroom was suddenly, inexplicably plunged into darkness. The many gas lights that lined the walls, as well as the grand chandelier above, still glowed with illumination, but the light seemed unable to pierce its way through the multitude of shadows. A deep rumbling began to echo throughout the room, as if the whole manor were being rocked back and forth.

Surprised exclamations sounded as several people jumped back, streams of thick steam unaccountably hissing out from between the floorboards. The hollow bell continued to toll and then the ballroom was flooded with illumination as an unholy blue light began to stream in from the windows that looked out on the back lawn. Directly opposite this, the wall trembled and shook violently, cracking and splitting apart with a loud groan. The two sections pulled further apart, exposing what seemed to be a tunnel or corridor of some sort, its fog filled length stretching back to be lost in darkness.

The great bell rang out one last time and then fell silent.

Draco and everyone else stood frozen in place, unsure of what to make of all that had just happened. Those nearest the strange corridor shuffled uncertainly, trying to appear less discomforted than they were. Nobody spoke, as if afraid to break the silence that permeated the air with a palpable presence. Then, so softly that it could only barely be heard, the crying wails of a baby echoed from the corridor. Nervous glances were exchanged and several less brave souls began to step back from the passage opening.

It was Adrian Pucey that defied the general trend and actually moved towards the noise. His steps were tentative, but he slowly approached the gaping aperture that had appeared in the ballroom wall. He glanced back, over his shoulder, and briefly matched his gaze with Draco's. Visibly steeling his nerve, he turned back to the corridor and set one foot over the threshold.

A monster more suited for a nightmare than reality burst into view with incredible speed. It scuttled sinuously along the high roof of the corridor, moving with inelegant and inhuman grace. Its face was a mockery, twisted and distorted. Before Pucey could do more than scream, the beast reached down and wrapped both arms, each as thick as his thighs, round the man's waist and pulled him back into the shadows. It vanished just as quickly as it had appeared; Pucey's fading shrieks of pain and terror the only indication of its having been there.



"Oh my god," breathed Blaise in horror.

"What in Merlin's name was that thing?" asked Daphne as she clung to Astoria.

"A demon! It must have been! A demon from the depths of Hell!" cried Phillip Chanard, scrabbling back to put as much distance between himself and the exposed corridor as he could manage.

"Impossible!" Draco scoffed, though his voice trembled with uncertainty. "Demon's aren't real! They're just stories - made up by superstitious Muggles!"

"Then what the fuck was that thing?!" demanded Nott, almost hysterical.

"My associate."

The smooth, deep voice was so unexpected that several of those present screamed in fright. Everyone spun round to discover that someone else was now present. A tall, dark figure now stood in the main doorway to the Malfoy ballroom. Shimmering blue-white light shone from behind him as a low, thick mist flowed around his feet and into the room.

The light and the shadows it cast made it difficult to discern details, but the man was clearly wearing strange robes of black leather and his bald head was entirely devoid of colour. Deep cuts crisscrossed his face, adorned by gleaming steel pins at each intersection. He held himself stiff and erect, like a king, but with his arms resting easily by his sides.

After a moment, three other figures emerged from the light, moving to stand just behind their leader. All were dressed in similar to their leader; black leather garments that were hooked and sewn and grossly intertwined with their pale flesh.

First there was a woman that might once have been considered beautiful. Her throat had been sliced open and the skin peeled back by eight hooks. The centre of her chest lay exposed, flanked by her modest leather-clad breasts. A deep and terrible gash ran from her sternum down to just past her navel, crudely and brutally stitched closed by thick strands of steel wire.

Next was a stocky figure, corpulent yet strong in appearance, his blubbery features possessing a slightly more swarthy complexion than his fellows but no less pale. His eyes were hidden beneath a pair of thick, black goggles. A massive and wicked looking meat hook was held loosely in one hand and he would periodically run his tongue back and forth over his swollen, blue lips.

And last in this dreadful menagerie, was a chattering monstrosity. It possessed an exposed death's head grin of teeth and an enormous mass of layered scar tissue that consumed both eyes and nose. Knives and blades of all shapes and sizes hung from its waist, waiting to be drawn and used; an arsenal of pain. It was not as large as the fat man, but its every move spoke of untold physical power.

Several of the people present, mostly those that were a comfortable distance from the gaping tear in the ballroom wall, redirected their wands at these new arrivals. The four figures ignored them all and began to slowly advance further into the room, moving to where Draco, Blaise and Nott were standing. They had just passed Terrence Higgs when he took a step away from his companions and thrust out his wand.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" he screamed, sending a Killing Curse rocketing into Pinhead's unguarded back.

The Black Pope did not even break stride.

Higgs stared in a sort of horrified disbelief, quickly glancing down at his wand to check that it was working properly. He looked up, another spell on his lips, just as Pinhead twitched the fingers of one hand. In the blink of an eye, a thick length of chain seemed to explode out of the shimmering light at the ballroom's entrance.

The chain struck Higgs in the back of his neck, erupting out the other side and sending a small spray of blood flying. Unable to either gag or scream, Higgs had only enough time to drop his wand and grab the barbed link that protruded from his throat when it was pulled sharply back whence it came. Falling flat on his back, he could manage nothing more than a weak gurgle, his legs kicking out wildly in search of purchase, as he was reeled backwards to vanish amidst the glowing fog.

Long seconds of absolute silence reigned as all present stared after their departed comrade. Then a confused shift took place as everyone tried to simultaneously move away from the entrance, yet remain a safe distance from the four visitors. That one of the ballroom walls also had a monster filled corridor emerging from it only served to make these movements even more complex.

"Who... who the hell are you people?" Draco was finally able to ask.

By now Pinhead and his three cohorts were standing just a few short feet away, close enough that Draco had no difficulty in seeing the details of their mutilated features. The lead cenobite regarded him coolly for a moment, as if affronted by the question. He took several steps forward, drawing close enough to touch him, and calmly handed Draco a business card as an answer. Draco was so surprised that he accepted without thinking. He glanced down at the weathered slip of paper.

## **ALL PROBLEMS SOLVED**

Draco stared in disbelief at the words, unable to comprehend the meaning behind it all.

∞Oo∞

*Somewhere, somewhen*

"All problems solved, Draco," explained Pinhead as Draco came crashing back to reality, "but you never stopped to consider what the problem was, or how it would be dealt with."

"No... no... no..." Draco groaned piteously, unwilling to accept what he had just witnessed.

"You see, Draco, the problem... was you."

/oOo\

*Midnight, April 13th, 2007*

*Malfoy Manor*

"Who... what... where...?"

Blaise Zabini's mostly incoherent questions were possibly the most pertinent queries he had ever chanced to ask in all of his life. In point of fact almost everyone else present was silently asking themselves exactly the same things.

Pinhead ignored the questions, his attention instead focused upon the object that had allowed them to be summoned here. He knelt down to retrieve the Lament Configuration from its place on the ballroom floor. As he rose back to his full height the bell tolled once more, its echoes rings throughout the manor. He held the box with both hands, tucked close to his body just in front of the navel, like a priest holding a priceless holy artefact at benediction.

"What the fuck is going on?" demanded Nott, masking his fear with belligerence.

Pinhead continued to ignore the three men standing not far from him. His attention was on the box and nothing else. Instead it was his subordinate, the throatless woman that answered. Her voice was hollow and brittle when she spoke. "You opened the box. We came."

Nott licked his lips and asked, "You came? Why? For what reason?"

"We have come to take what is ours," the woman answered.

"Sod that," Nott exclaimed, raising his wand. "*Sectumsemptra!*"

The curse, taught to many past Slytherin students by their old head of house, slammed into the woman's chest before anyone could blink. Massive and jagged cuts tore through her flesh as she staggered back. A step. Two steps. She regained quickly her footing and poise. The gaping and bloodless wounds, exposing black, necrotised tissue, seemed to sew themselves shut.

Nott stared at her in disbelief. So did everyone else. He jabbed his wand a second time and cursed, "*Crucio!*"

Throatless, as she was sometimes called, regarded the spell with the same dispassion she had displayed for the one before it. Not bothering to dodge or duck, the stream of red light connected with her sternum. As the magic ravaged over her, she cocked her head in a birdlike manner and stared back at her attacker. Her lips barely moved, but there was the distinct impression that she was smiling, silently laughing at Nott's efforts.

"That is no way to treat a lady," she declared finally as Nott released the curse.

"Who are you?" asked Nott in a hushed whisper, awed by her passive display of power.

With measured strides, Throatless approached him. Stopping just short, she reached out a hand and gently brushed Nott's wand arm aside. Her gloved fingers traced a gentle path along his arm and to his chest. Her black eyes remained locked with Nott's the entire while. Then, to the astonishment of those watching, she shoved hard against his sternum.

The blow was impossibly strong and sent Nott flying through the air, his breath knocked out of him. He crashed against the wall behind him and, as if they had been waiting for him, short lengths of barbed chain exploded out of the wooden panelling. The chains quickly wrapped themselves around his wrists and ankles, moving fast enough that he never had a chance to fall. By the time anyone else realized what was happening, Nott was bound spread-eagled to the back wall, thick trickles of blood dribbling down from where he was being held.

Throatless regarded her work with cold satisfaction and announced, "Time to play, Theodore."

"Enough," said Pinhead decisively. Throatless reluctantly acknowledged the order and backed down, leaving Nott suspended but still alive. Pinhead finally turned his attention to those surrounding him. His black eyes fixed on the one man still standing immediately in front of him. "Draco Malfoy."

"You - you know me?" asked Draco, struggling to stand his ground in the face of this monster.

"I know your father. Lucius. His flesh. His soul," Pinhead replied softly, as if in remembrance. He continued his examination of Draco and concluded, "You are so very like him. I feel a distinct sense of déjà vu."

"You know where he is? You know what happened to him?" Draco asked, his eagerness for news of Lucius momentarily overwhelming his fear. "Tell me!"

"Such arrogance... to think you can make demands of one such as I," said Pinhead, with a miniscule shake of his head. "You believe too strongly in your own superiority."

And what do you believe in?" asked Draco in return, unwilling to back down despite his every instinct screaming for him to do just that.

"Nothing," Pinhead immediately replied. "I am so... exquisitely... empty."

Draco's eyes cut to where Nott was hanging. He swallowed convulsively and then glanced at his sole remaining companion, Blaise. The normally dour man was utterly pale in the face, despite his swarthy complexion. Most telling of all was his expression; one of fraught terror. If Draco were to receive any assistance in this matter, it would clearly have to come from someone else.

Licking his lips, Draco tried to match gazes with Pinhead. He found it strangely easy, though not for any of the right reasons. Staring into the demon's eyes was an experience not unlike a sheep gaping up into the watchful eyes of a hungry dragon. It was very easy to get lost in those bottomless black eyes and find yourself unable to move.

"What – what do you want?" he managed to choke out, his throat painfully dry.

"What do *you* want, Draco?" asked Pinhead in return.

"Power," he answered, finding it within himself to stand tall and defiant. "I was told that opening Potter's box would give me power."

"Ah," Pinhead nodded. "And what would you do with this power?"

"Take back what's mine. I want it back – all of it. The respect, the influence, the control. I will make it so that the mudbloods will know their place in the world. I'll show Potter and the other blood-traitors what happens when they try to pull the rest of us down to their level. I'll bring back the old ways and rule over the people as I was supposed to! I'll have my revenge!"

Pinhead listened impassively as Draco grew more and more passionate until he was almost ranting. "You have the ambition of a Slytherin," he said, when Draco paused for breathe. "The ambition, yes, but you possess neither the cunning, nor the subtlety to truly succeed in your goals."

Draco's face paled in fury at the criticism. His hands clenched into tight fists, his knuckles creaking under the strain. He began reached for his wand, but froze when a glimmer of anticipation passed through Pinhead's eyes. Despite the utter expressionless set of his face, the demon was clearly hoping that Draco would make the mistake of lashing out against him. Just as Nott had done. Draco looked back to where his comrade was bound and suspended against the back wall.

Swallowing nervously, he asked, "What do I have to do? For you to give me the power I want?"

"You have already done what was needed," answered Pinhead. "You opened the box."

"Then you're going to give me the power?" Draco asked uncertainly. The demon was being very obtuse.

"You shall experience all that the box can offer," Pinhead promised.

"Power?"

"Pleasure."

Draco blinked at the unexpected reply. He looked dumbly at Pinhead and repeated, "Pleasure?"

"Pain."

By now Draco was completely confused. He simply could not understand the direction in which the conversation had seemingly turned. How could Voldemort, the Dark Lord, have been defeated by pleasure? Pain, certainly, Draco could understand that. Anyone that had ever experienced a Cruciatus Curse could understand the power of pain. But pleasure? It made no sense.

"Both. Apart. Together," Pinhead continued staidly. "Without limits. Without end."

"What the bloody fuck are you talking about?" demanded Draco in frustration.

An answer might have been forthcoming, but Blaise acted before anything more could be said. The man had clearly reached his limits as he loosed a strangled sound and started running, pushing passed Draco and the four beings that the box had summoned. He ran with the desperation of someone that knew their end was nigh and could think of nothing that might save them. For a moment, it appeared that he might make it; that he might be allowed to escape.

Pinhead watched dispassionately as Blaise fled. He allowed the running man to cover half the distance to where the ballroom doors had once been. Of course, those doors were no longer present, but it was amusing to see the attempted dash for freedom and safety. Pinhead languidly lifted his arm and pointed.

"Fetch!" he commanded sternly.

The ballroom floor exploded upwards as a hideous beast burst out into the open directly in front of the fleeing Blaise. It looked rather like the unfortunately result of a man and dog that had been involved in a particularly messy automobile accident. He tried to stop, but his momentum was too great and he almost literally fell into the monster's mauling attack. It latched its jaws around Blaise's throat and pulled him, screaming and thrashing, back into the pit that it had emerged from.

This was too much for the assembled crowd. Their fear induced paralysis wavered and finally collapsed as the fight or flight response inverted itself.

Wands raised and curses began to fly in desperate attempts to defeat the creatures that the box had summoned. The four demons merely stood in place and watched. The barrage of magic washed over them to no effect.

"Enough," Pinhead repeated his earlier command. His eyes flicked to his comrades. "Take them."

Throatless bowed her head. "Time to play," she pronounced, her attention returning to her earlier victim; Nott.

Butterball, rather than recognizing the order, simply flipped his meat hook over. He turned and began to advance to where Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle were standing, watching the proceedings in dumb horror. The thick but sharp tip of the hook sunk deep into Goyle's chest before either of them knew what was happening. Yells and cries of pain and fear began to fill the ballroom as more monstrous shapes started to emerge from the shadows.

A familiar voice screamed in pure terror and Draco whipped his head round to see that Daphne was now in the clutches of the Chatterer. The hideously mutilated creature had somehow gotten behind her and now held her tightly in its grasp. One arm was flung across her body, its gloved hand clutching a breast in what had to be an agonisingly strong grip. The other hand held a jagged knife and was almost casually cutting away at the struggling witch's robes. Daphne's sister, Astoria, was trying to help free her, but the Chatterer was simply too strong as it slowly dragged her towards a shadowy corner.

Draco tried to move forward, instinctively seeking to rescue his mistress, but froze as a cold prickle ran up his spine. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that Pinhead was watching him closely. The demon had remained perfectly still the entire while, but now he had begun to move. Bottomless black eyes glanced up to the ceiling and a length of chain answered the call, shooting out of the darkness and straight towards Draco.

He tried to dodge but was too slow. The hooked end of the chain spiralled round his left wrist and stabbed itself into his hand, causing him to drop his wand. Draco squealed in pain and reached over with his uninjured hand in an attempt to pry himself loose. Another glance upwards from Pinhead led to a second chain dropping down. This time the hook snagged Draco's right hand, driving itself through his palm and out the other side. With a jerk the chains pulled back, yanking both arms in opposite directions. Draco cried out as pain shot down his arms and into his torso.

Pinhead continued to advance and new chains continued to lash out, faster and faster. One wrapped itself several times round his right leg before burrowing into his ankle. Another stabbed into his left Achilles tendon, severing it with a resounding snap. Yet another dug into his stomach and two others into his chest. Perhaps worst of all, a second pair latched onto Draco's face, hooking themselves into his cheeks.

"Now, shall we talk sensibly?" asked Pinhead calmly.

"What do you want from me?" begged Draco through his tears.

Pinhead walked slowly up to him. "What we want is you, Draco."

Draco tried to struggle, to fight his way free, but the chain hooks were too deeply embedded. Every movement, every attempt to pull loose only served to make them dig even deeper and grant him even greater amounts of pain. He quickly relented and allowed himself to hang limply, without resistance.

"There is nothing that you can offer us. You are ours. Your life is ours. Your soul is ours. But first..." Pinhead stroked the back of his hand over Draco's tearstained cheek, "first, we will know your flesh."

The chains began to pull taut, straining Draco's body to the limits. His screams of pain almost eclipsed the sound of his body being rent to pieces.

∞∞∞/

*Somewhere, somewhen*

His lesson finally over, Pinhead inclined his head the barest fraction and the chains holding Draco suspended instantly released him. They did not disappear, but remained in place, dangling down from above like malicious and threatening vines. He watched, patiently, as Draco curled into a tight ball and whimpered in agony, both physical and mental.

"No, it's impossible!" Draco desperately bawled. "It's all a lie! A lie! It can't be true! It can't!"

"You cannot run forever. Eventually the truth will catch up to you and when it does... you must pay the price," Pinhead patiently explained. He paused for a beat and then asked, "You were willing to pay the price weren't you?"

Draco paused and found himself remembering, in perfect and vivid detail, his encounter at the All Problems Solved shop.

*The old man gave him a narrowstare and asked, "And are you willing to pay the price?"*

*Draco sneered and reached into his robe. He pulled out a money bag, filled with galleons, and tossed it onto the counter. The drawstring was loose enough that several coins were able to spill out and scatter before the old man.*

*The old man smiled; the smile of someone who knows a secret.*

*"Oh, the price is far greater than mere money, but you'll discover that for yourself."*

Draco blinked through his tears and looked up at Pinhead. "The old man works for Potter, doesn't he? Whenever he wants to get rid of someone, like me, he arranges for them to go there and that man, he tells them about the box – the box that brings you to them."

Pinhead began to slowly circle round the fallen wizard from all angles. As he walked, he spoke. "Not quite. While the merchant does seek to deliver the appropriate users to us, he is not in Harry Potter's employ."

"Then why me? Why did you choose me?"

"Because you were an interesting study, Draco," the circling Pinhead answered. "Lust, greed, deception. Fertile ground for our games."

"A game?" repeated Draco incredulously. "This has been a *game* for you?"

"Ah, but the play's the thing, isn't it? And this has been an amusing drama," Pinhead drew to a halt, standing in front of Draco. "But while it was entertaining - watching you search for answers when you did not even know the questions, it is now time to draw the curtains closed and for the actors to take a final bow."

Pinhead remained perfectly still, as he always did when not deliberately moving, but his eye shifted to look at something behind Draco. Despite the pain it caused him, Draco scrambled around to see what the demon was now focused upon. He froze in place as he spotted the five figures that were slowly emerging from the darkness. He recognised all of them, as they had played a great part in his recent torments, though he could not understand what they were doing here.

Hermione Potter. Ginny and Neville Longbottom. Ron and Luna Weasley.

Draco looked around frantically for the one person that was missing from the group; Harry Potter. But his nemesis was nowhere to be seen. If Potter was there, he remained hidden in the shadows.

"Where is he? Where's Potter?" he demanded to know, though there was no force behind his words. Only desperation.

"Harry is not here. Nor are his wife and friends," replied Pinhead.

"But..." Draco trailed off as the new arrivals underwent a startling transformation.

It began with Hermione, who was wearing a strange smirk on her face. It was very unlike her. The smirk faded quickly as her entire form shifted somehow, Draco could not explain how it happened. The bushy brown hair vanished, replaced by bare, pale scalp. The hard brown eyes turned a bottomless black. Her plum robes shifted into black leather. She trailed a hand down the gruesome scar between her breasts, settling her fingers on the sharp blades that hung at her waist. And in the end; Throatless was standing before him.

Unwillingly Draco found himself watching as the others underwent similar changes. Ginny was the one that revealed her true form next, following on Hermione's heels. In many respects she now bore a close resemblance to Throatless, save that her most noticeable feature was the fact that the skin of her scalp had been peeled to either side, pinned to her shoulders by hooks, and leaving the top of her skull exposed. Draco did not recognise her, as she had not accompanied Pinhead during his visit to Malfoy Manor.

Neville was next to change, his human disguise stripping away in concert with his 'wife'. He increased in size, his skin growing swarthy and blubbery. As with the others, he wore black leather robes that were entwined and twisted into his flesh. Almost as an afterthought, thick black goggles covered his eyes. Held loosely in his hand was a massive and bloodstained meat hook. This was the creature that had butchered Crabbe and Goyle; Butterball.

The transformation of Ron into the twisted mess of scar tissue that was known as the Chatterer was almost anticlimactic by this point. He had been, after all, the last of the males remaining. The beast was focused on Draco with a chilling intensity, despite its lack of eyes. It clicked its teeth together in a rapid cadence, a sign of its anticipation, its hunger to begin.

But it was the last of the five figures that truly caught Draco's attention. The shift from Luna into her true form was as indefinable as the others. She was bald, as they all were, and inhumanly pale. Her clothes were different from he expected. They were leather, yes, but tight and form fitting, rather than the almost ceremonial dress that the other cenobites wore. Thick, bladed chains were wrapped round her, binding her breasts and crotch in some demented form of sadism, the black outfit left torn and ragged where they lay, exposing her pale white flesh. Her face, lips sewn shut with thick wire, was perfectly recognisable.

"Aunt Bella?"

"Yes, a remarkable woman. Most supple and delicious," commented Pinhead. "The Labyrinth still rings with the echoes of her agony."

It was difficult to tear his eyes away from his aunt's demented figure, but Draco managed to turn his attention back to Pinhead. The man, if he could be called that, had not moved an inch. He remained perfectly in place and perfectly still, in a way that no human could match. Throatless had moved to stand next to him, slightly behind and to the side; the position of a trusted lieutenant.

Staring into the bottomless black of Pinhead's eyes, Draco came to a sudden realization. He looked to Bellatrix and then back to Pinhead. If the Dark Lord's most fanatical follower, his chief lieutenant, was now in the service of the box demons...

"Voldemort... he's here as well, isn't he?"

"Yes," Pinhead confirmed. "Tom Riddle remains in our caring, yet eternally malevolent, embrace."

Draco swallowed and reluctantly, for he did not really want to hear the answer, asked, "My father?"

Not a single muscle in Pinhead's expression moved, yet it seemed that he smiled. His eyes never straying from Draco, he turned his head slightly to one side and called, "Lucius."

Responding to the summons, another shape stepped out of the surrounding darkness. Draco's breath caught in his throat and he could feel his heart skipping a beat as he took in the appearance of the new arrival.

Lucius Malfoy's face was exactly as it had been a decade earlier. His features were still sharp and aristocratic. His grey eyes were still cool and commanding. His hair was still immaculate and carefully coifed. But at his neck was a thick black leather collar and below that was a nightmare.

The former head of the Malfoy family had been skinned alive, only his head had been left untouched – perhaps as some sort of twisted mockery to the vanity he clung to in life. His body had been reduced to a red and white mockery, covered in a thin coat of blood that slowly dripped down to the floor. Bloody footprints traced his path back into the shadows. He had also been disembowelled and likely flayed until his abdomen had been torn away, leaving nothing but his spine to connect his chest to his hips. Draco blanched at the realization that his father's genitals had also been skinned. Rather crudely at that.

"Draco," greeted Lucius.

"Oh my god," breathed Draco.

"If you ever listen to anything I have ever said, listen to this," Lucius said. "There is no god in the Labyrinth."

"You – you helped them?" asked Draco in disbelief. "You helped them do this to me!"

With a shake of his head Lucius corrected him, "You did this yourself. My part in this only happened much later, after you had already opened the door."

Angry, no, furious at his father's betray, regardless of the reason, Draco forced himself to his feet and leaned into Lucius' unmarred face. "Damn you! You were there! You helped escort me into the fucking courtroom!"

"Watch you tongue, boy. Your mother and I did not raise a commoner," commanded Lucius. He followed his words with a sharp backhand that sent Draco back to the floor with a bloody imprint on his cheek.

"You have done well, Lucius," Pinhead praised. "You may leave us."

Lucius seemed to curl in upon himself, as if terrified now that Pinhead's attention was upon him, however briefly. "Thank you," he muttered before turning on a heel and quickly retreating back into the shadows. He did not spare a backward glance to where Draco had fallen.

Draco spat and swore, "Bastard."

"Such resentment. Even now; at the end," commented Pinhead.

"It was all a lie, wasn't it?" Draco asked bitterly. "There was no power in the box. Potter never used it to kill Voldemort – he used you."

"A risky game, but one that Harry played well," said Pinhead.

"So the only thing that damned thing does is summon you?"

"There are many configurations. But, yes, opening the schism is its first purpose."

"But why do you do it? Why do you help him?"

"Why shouldn't we?" Pinhead asked in return. "Harry built the Lament Configuration with his own hands. Once you have opened such a door, it can never be closed. Harry understands that. That is why the box will always return to him. Until the next time."

"Potter," muttered Draco. "And when he gets it back? What then? He puts it on its barely guarded pedestal and waits for someone else to come steal it?"

"A viciously simple trap, is it not? Leading his enemies to their fates with a promise of power."

Draco laughed mirthlessly. "So I was right; Potter *was* out to get me!"

"On the contrary," Pinhead corrected. "He only became aware of your interest in the Lament Configuration when you and your friends stole it."

"Hah hah, wonderful," Draco continued to laugh, this time slightly hysterically. "Beaten by Potter when he wasn't even trying!"

Pinhead nodded in agreement. "That is, I think, the most sublime aspect of this little charade. That while you considered Harry to be your greatest nemesis, he could scarcely be bothered to consider you more than a minor annoyance."

Throatless stepped forward, a hooked blade in hand, and began to approach. "And now... it's time to play."

"Time to play," agreed Butterball, licking his thick lips.

He tried to get away, scrabbling on his hands and knees, but found himself backing himself into the unyielding legs of the Chatterer. The wretched beast chattered eagerly as it reached down and grabbed him by the upper arms. Without any visible effort it hoisted him up and set him on his feet, but retained a firm hold on him even as he stood under his own power.

Please - I'm - I'm a powerful wizard - *very powerful!*!" stammered Draco, trying to bargain his way out.

"Your world's most powerful wizard means no more to us than does its most insignificant insect," countered Pinhead.

"I - I can give you anything you want... Anything! *Anything!*" Draco offered.

"We already have what we want," Throatless informed him.

"Me?" asked Draco dumbly. The demons' silence served as an answer. "No... no, please... no..."

"There is a secret song at the centre of the world, Draco, and its sound is that of razors through flesh," Pinhead proclaimed as he stepped close, the dangling chains falling back as he passed. "You have been chosen to become a part of that chorus."

"You... want me... to join you?" asked Draco uncertainly.

"Join us? Hardly," scoffed Pinhead, his voice the only indication of his thoughts on that suggestion. "We are the conductors of the symphony and you are but an instrument for us to tune and to play."

"But - but why? *Why?*" Draco begged, desperate to understand. "Why put me through all that - that charade?! Why not just kill me and have done with it?!"

"Because, dreams are such a fruitful place to plant the seeds of terror."

"A dream? This was all a dream?" asked Draco.

"Not a dream, Draco. This is your very own personal damnation. A nightmare from which you will never awaken. The worst nightmare of all," announced Pinhead with relish, taking great pleasure in the exquisitely tortured scream his victim let out as he finally understood... that his entire ordeal... had been for naught.

The Black Pope permitted himself the ghost of a smile.

"Welcome... to reality."

-oOo-

*April 14th, 2007*

*Madingley Grange*

Hermione collapsed atop of Harry, utterly spent, her bare skin glistening under a sheen of sweat. Her hips continued to undulate against his, in time to her pants of exertion. Eventually, after several long minutes, the couple settled into comfortable stillness, still joined but content to simply lie together in the afterglow of their bout of frantic lovemaking this morning.

Enjoying these languid few moments Harry trailed a hand over the back of Hermione's thigh, pausing to cup a buttock and lovingly caress it. His fingers then traced their way through the soft cleft of her rear and up her spine, causing her to shiver and gasp softly. Reaching up his hand tangled itself in her thick mane and pulled her lips to his for a kiss that promised to re-ignite their passions.

"Is it just me," she asked, breathing heavily as they broke apart, "or is our lovemaking always this good after some poor fool opens the box?"

"It's just you," replied Harry, grabbing her by the hips again and grinding her down onto his pelvis, eliciting groans of pleasure from them both. "It's always this good, no matter what."

"Oh, Harry, you are a jewel," Hermione purred, immensely pleased by his reply.

By the time Pansy had Flooed over, they had been already been aware of the break in at the All Purpose Potter Tools building for quite some time. Draco and his accomplices were not nearly as good a bunch of thieves as they thought they were. While the various wards and protections surrounding the Lament Configuration were hardly difficult to bypass, there were a multitude of hidden Detection Wards that recorded the comings and goings of everyone that entered the premises; authorised or not.

Nobody was especially surprised that Draco had stolen the puzzle box. In fact, they were more surprised that it had taken him so long. There had been a great deal of money riding on it, at least between those that were in the know. Ultimately the pot, now an impressive two hundred galleons, had been won by Luna; who had bet that it would be a decade after graduating from Hogwarts before Draco would manage to accomplish anything. She had also bet that he would need help to do so, though there had been no money wagered on that one.

The six conspirators, so to speak, had gathered at Madingley Grange to discuss matters after the wards had alerted them to the theft. They had no inclination of going to stop Draco, or even to merely watch. Few people were ever unlucky enough to solve the box's puzzle and bring forth Pinhead and his companions. Few of those were lucky enough to escape such an encounter unscathed. Fewer still were ever insane enough, or desperate enough, to call upon the cenobites for a second time. Even Harry, who had done just that, had no desire to tempt fate a third time.

Pansy had been understandably surprised by their apparent lack of concern. She had spent a somewhat pleasant hour in the Potter's lounge, alternately sipping either tea or brandy, as she related her efforts to direct Draco into taking possession of the box. After assurances that they would not be bringing any legal powers to bear against her and that, come morning, her husband would no longer be a consideration, Pansy had departed through the Floo to Locke Keep, something that caused raised eyebrows all round for a variety of reasons.

The group, still occasionally referred to as the Ministry Crew (after their jaunt into the Department of Mysteries), had spent another hour or so talking about the possible ramifications of this latest opening of the Lament Configuration. Finally, at near two o'clock in the morning, the Weasleys and Longbottoms had finished their last round of drinks and said their goodbyes. Harry and Hermione had barely been able to restrain themselves until after their friends had departed through the fireplace.

Their lovemaking continued throughout what was left of the night, wild and animalistic in its intensity, until both succumbed to exhaustion. Waking late the next morning, only minutes from midday actually, they had resumed their earlier activities with undiminished enthusiasm. It was as Hermione had said; their passion was always enflamed to such heights after someone opened the box.

Another bout of unbridled sex seemed likely, until both Harry and Hermione's stomachs let it be known that it was time to vacate the bedroom and scrounge up something to eat.

"Oh, I'm suddenly feeling so hungry," announced Hermione, reluctantly stilling the rocking motion of her hips.

"Yeah," agreed Harry with a disappointed sigh. "It's quite late. We missed breakfast."

Looking around, Hermione managed to locate their alarm clock. "It's after noon," she said, surprised at this realization. "We must have had a later night than we realized."

"Why don't you have a shower?" suggested Harry, gently easing his wife off of his lap and separating them from each other for the first time since they had fallen asleep. "I'll go down to the kitchen and make us some omelettes."

Hermione kissed him, with less passion than before but with as much love as always. "Sound's delicious," she purred as they parted, before rolling off the bed and padding to the bathroom.

Harry watched her depart, his eyes trailing down her back and fixating on the delightful curve of her rear. Once she had disappeared from sight and the sounds of running water reached his ears, he climbed out of bed himself, threw on his favourite bathrobe and made his way downstairs. He had just reached the first landing, where he paused to recollect how he and Hermione had made love at that very spot against the wall the previous night, when the property wards alerted him to the fact that a visitor was making their way up the garden path.

Finishing his descent of the stairs, Harry moved to the reception area where he unlocked the front door and waited. At the very last second he pulled the door open, revealing the surprised features of Nymphadora Lupin. The years had been very kind to the beautiful Auror, though some of the less charitable gossips claimed this was due to her skills as metamorphmagus. It was only the fact that she was now married to Remus Lupin, one of the most level-headed wizards to be found, that prevented her from hexing the mouths of anyone that dared say such things in her presence.

"Wotcher Harry," Tonks grinned. Despite being married, she still insisted on being called by her maiden name.

"Tonks, this is a surprise," said Harry, matching her grin. "What brings you to our doorstep?"

"Business, I'm afraid," admitted Tonks, her powder-blue hair changing to a dark auburn as the grin slipping into a frown.

Harry answered with a grimace and stepped aside to allow her entry into the house. Closing the front door, he followed her into the lounge, where Tonks flung herself onto the largest couch. Settling in his favourite armchair, he asked, "What's the problem?" Before she could reply, he held up a hand and said, "Wait, let me guess – it has something to do with APPT and Draco Malfoy."

Tonks stared at him in surprise before she nodded in confirmation and began to explain. "We received a call from Millicent Bulstrode this morning. She seemed to think something had happened at Malfoy Manor last night. Apparently Draco had stolen something and she was worried about Pansy."

"Have you had a look yet?" asked Harry.

"Yes. When we couldn't get a reply on the Floo, Scrimgeour sent Kingsley and me to investigate."

"Did you find anything?"

Harry and Tonks turned in their seats as Hermione stepped into the room. She had finished her shower, hurrying through it due to Tonks' arrival, and had come down to join them after quickly dressing.

"Not a thing," answered Tonks. "The place is deserted. No sign of Draco or anyone else."

"That isn't what I asked, Tonks," countered Hermione, moving to sit next to Harry in the armchair. "I wanted to know if you found any *thing*."

"Well, that's why I'm here, actually."

"You found what Draco and his friends stole," said Harry.

"Yes; one of your Potter Tools. I'm sure you know which one," replied Tonks, looking pointedly at Harry.

"I hope nobody tried to play around with it."

"Of course not," Tonks denied, affronted by the idea. "It's evidence, after all."



Well, that's a relief," Hermione sighed.

Tonks laughed darkly and said, "Yeah, well, we don't want a whole bunch of Aurors and DMLE personnel to 'disappear' as well."

Harry groaned, "Please don't tell me I have to come in for questions. Again."

"Sorry," Tonks apologised, "but you know how it is."

"Wonderful."

"And what does Pansy have to say about all this?" asked Hermione.

"Draco's wife?" Tonks asked. She shrugged and then shook her head. "Nobody knows where she is."

"I suppose we can pick her up on the way," mused Harry.

"What? You know where she is?"

"Of course we do."

"How the devil do you know that?" asked Tonks, amazed.

-oOo-

*April 13th, 2007*

*St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries*

Draco Malfoy returned to consciousness with remarkable speed and alacrity. Of course, this probably had something to do with the fact that pain, comparable to the Cruciatius Curse, was lancing its way through his skull.

"Sonuvabitch!" he swore, reaching up to clutch his throbbing head with both hands. He knew it was ill-befitting someone of his station to use such vulgarities, but right now he was in too much pain to give a damn.

"Oh goody gumdrops, you're back for more!"

Wincing from the pain induced by both the volume and the overly eager tone of the proclamation, Draco looked to one side to find the ever vivacious Loony Luna Weasley peering down at him with undisguised curiosity. Bright blue eyes that should have been somewhat vacant were strangely focused and flickering with an emotion he could not immediately place.

"Loony," Draco managed, though his drawl was forced. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I work here, Drakkie-pooch," the blonde witch stated happily.

Draco looked up in surprise, the motion causing a stab of pain in the back of his head. Examining the room, he found that he was not in Malfoy Manor, as he had expected. From the look of things, he realized that he was in fact in one of the private rooms at St. Mungo's.

"How did I get here?" asked Draco, more to himself than to Luna.

"Oh, you'll find out... eventually," Luna sang maliciously.

-oOo-

*April 14th, 2007*

*Locke Keep*

It had taken a while, but Harry had finally mastered the art of travelling by Floo. That is to say; he no longer fell on his arse whenever he arrived at his destination. Still, he tried to avoid travel by flaming chimney whenever possible. Emerging from the fireplace, Harry stepped aside for Tonk's arrival. Waiting for his companion to make her appearance, he took a moment to examine their location.

Locke Keep was a comfortable country cottage, in south Devon, and home to one of the Wimbourne Wasps' leading Chasers; Marcus Flint. The furnishings were mostly functional; nothing being particularly stylish or overly expensive. A few framed photographs scattered about; with Flint featuring predominantly in all of them. Some of the Wasps' official Quidditch posters, but only those were Flint was present. There was also a racy, deep green bra hanging over the back of the couch. All-in-all it was about what you would expect from a somewhat narcissistic Quidditch player and long-time bachelor.

With a rush of green flames, Tonks stepped out of the fireplace and into the den. She had only just cleared the hearth when her right foot caught on the carpet's edge, sending her stumbling forward. It was very much a re-enactment of almost every visit she had ever made to Grimmauld Place; only without the mad ravings of Sirius' mother's portrait.

"Who's there?"

Harry turned his gaze away from Tonks, who was balancing precariously on one leg with both arms spinning wildly in an attempt to remain upright,

and took in the sight of Pansy Malfoy when she appeared in the doorway. Draco's wife was wearing one of Flint's Quidditch shirts and little else, though thankfully the shirt was enough to cover everything that needed covering.

"Potter?" she asked, clearly surprised by his presence. "What – what are you doing here?"

"Good morning, Pansy," Harry acknowledged. He made a show of looking at her attire before asking, "Good night as well?"

In a manner strangely reminiscent of Professor McGonagall, Pansy's lips thinned to a narrow line as she replied, "Not that it's any of your business, but yes; a very good night. Now answer the damned question – what are you doing here?" She glanced at Tonks, "For that matter, why is *she* here?"

Tonks stepped up and explained, "The Aurors have been called in to investigate the disappearance of your husband, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Draco's missing? Really?" asked Pansy, affecting an air of disinterest.

"Yes, it seems he stole something from Harry here and... well... we're having a little trouble finding him."

Pansy looked at Harry, her expression one of mixed surprise and appreciation. "You work fast."

Harry replied with an almost Gallic shrug and said, "Honestly, I had nothing to do with it."

"Dragon dung," snorted Pansy in disbelief.

"I'm serious," Harry asserted. "My part in this extends only so far as the fact that Draco stole something of mine. Something he really shouldn't have."

"Pansy? Who are you talking to? Is there someone..." asked Marcus Flint as he stumbled into the room, clad in only a bright yellow bath towel that he had wrapped round his waist. It appeared that Harry and Hermione were not the only couple that had been late getting out of bed. He blinked in surprise at the sight of Harry and Tonks. "Potter?"

"Marcus," said Harry by way of greeting, ignoring the other man's state of undress.

"Do I really want to know what you're doing in my house? With an Auror?"

"Just dropped in to speak with Pansy," Harry explained. "Don't worry, we shouldn't be long."

Flint focused on Pansy and asked, "You alright with that?"

Pansy waved his concern aside and nodded, "It's fine, Marcus. I was expecting them."

"Merlin, man," grumbled Tonks. "Either put some clothes on or go back into the bedroom."

"Next time, give a call before coming over," said Flint before retreating back into the bedroom.

"Typical," commented Harry. "You spent an hour last night complaining that Draco was shagging Daphne, yet here you are..."

"Fuck you too, Potter," retorted Pansy coldly.

"No thanks, Pansy. Unlike you, I'm happily married."

"And I'm a merry widow," Pansy countered with a smirk. "So don't give me any of that moral claptrap."

"And what makes you so sure your husband is dead?" Tonks immediately asked. She moved closer to Pansy and gave her a pointed look. "Do you perhaps know something we don't, Mrs. Malfoy?"

"I knew Draco was dead the moment the fool stole Potter's puzzle box," sniffed Pansy, shifting so that Tonks was no longer crowding her. "That box was able to destroy the Dark Lord. Whatever his delusions, Draco didn't have a fraction of Voldemort's power."

"Yes, well, the Aurors are involved now. We both have some questions to answer," said Harry.

Pansy looked at him in surprise and asked, "Why do you need to answer questions?"

"It *is* my puzzle box," Harry reminded her with a wry grin.

"Good point."

"So, you coming?" he asked.

Pansy stood for a moment, considering, and then nodded.

"Let me get dressed."

April 13th, 2007

### *St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries*

Draco Malfoy returned to consciousness with remarkable speed and alacrity. Of course, this probably had something to do with the fact that pain, comparable to the Cruciatus Curse, was lancing its way through his skull.

"Sonuvabitch!" he swore, reaching up to clutch his throbbing head with both hands. He knew it was ill-befitting someone of his station to use such vulgarities, but right now he was in too much pain to give a damn.

"So, decided to rejoin the waking world, have we?"

Wincing from the pain induced by both the dry tone as well as the sarcasm dripping the words, Draco looked to one side to find his mistress Daphne Zabini staring at him with a hungry expression. Her piercing blue eyes gleamed with the barely restrained desire of someone that was being sorely teased.

"Daphne," Draco managed, his confusion readily apparent. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I work here, Draco," replied his lover, purring Draco's name in an endearing manner.

Draco looked up in surprise, the motion causing a stab of pain in the back of his head. Examining the room, he found that he was not in Malfoy Manor, as he had expected. From the look of things, he realized that he was in fact in one of the private rooms at St. Mungo's.

"How did I get here?" asked Draco, more to himself than to Daphne.

-oOo-

April 14th, 2007

### *Malfoy Manor*

Since that day when he had first opened the puzzle box, Harry had become well acquainted with the hidden world of magic. This was mostly through the efforts of the Merchant family, who had taken him in after the Dursleys unfortunate demise. But in all that time, Harry had never had a chance to visit Malfoy Manor. It was, he felt, darkly amusing that he should finally do so only after the last of the Malfoys (by blood that is) had passed on.

He was slightly startled at first to find himself emerging from the fireplace and being confronted with the aristocratic visage of Lucius Malfoy. Or rather the late wizard's portrait. After waiting several seconds to be lambasted by the painting, Harry was relieved to realize that the magicks governing the animation of the portrait had never been activated; leaving it as nothing more than a sheet of canvas.

"Draco moved the paint here shortly after he inherited the estate," said Pansy, who had come through first and been quietly watching Harry's reaction. "It was to be hung in the entrance foyer originally."

"As good a place as any," said Harry, looking around at what was obviously the manor's main study. "Why'd he move it here?"

"Two reasons," she explained. "Here, Draco could see it without having to move from his desk."

Harry eyed the desk in question. It was at least half again the size of the desk Dumbledore used in the headmaster's office. It was also mostly bare, being simply too expansive for the limited paperwork that required Draco's attention.

"Gak!" exclaimed Tonks as she exited the Floo and spotted the paint.

"That's the second reason," continued Pansy. "He felt that anyone entering the manor here would be properly intimidated by the sight of Lucius."

"I am *not* intimidated!" Tonks retorted. "It's just that I've had bad experiences with magical paintings."

"And umbrella stands," Harry quietly added.

"Oh, sod off, Harry," she grumbled.

"As enjoyable as you... witty... banter may be, perhaps we should find the other Aurors and get this over and done with?" asked Pansy impatiently.

"Yeah, come on," said Tonks, leading them from the study.

They found company soon enough, as Malfoy Manor had close to two dozen Aurors and other DMLE staff scurrying about it. Despite the fact that the family name had lost a good deal of its prestige and influence, there were still those in the Ministry catered to the person with largest bank account. The Malfoys still had a good sized pile of gold in their Gringotts vault.

After stopping one of her colleagues for directions, Tonks led Harry and Pansy to the main dining room, from where the Auror-In-Charge was operating.

"Harry, good afternoon," said Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Hello Kingsley," Harry greeted, shaking the large man's hand.

Kingsley turned his eyes to Pansy, masking his surprise at her presence, and gave a brief nod of acknowledgement. "Mrs. Malfoy."

Pansy more-or-less ignored him, most of her attention on her surroundings, but managed a distracted, "Auror Shacklebolt."

"How goes the investigation?" asked Harry.

"Rather fruitless thus far, but you'd expect as much considering..."

"Yes, considering."

Kingsley cleared his throat. He had never been at ease when dealing with the aftermath of the box being opened. No-one that knew its true nature was comfortable in its presence. Even talking about it was met with no small degree of reluctance. "Well, we've found exactly the same thing we've found every time we've been called out because of... it."

"Nothing," supplied Harry.

"Nothing," confirmed Kingsley.

"It's spooky the way that happens," said Tonks.

"Would you prefer to need a mop?" asked Harry dryly.

Tonks winced at the thought. While she had not been present at Hogwarts when Voldemort had been taken, Dumbledore had shared his memory of the event with the rest of the Order. The amount of bloodshed the cenobites had left in their wake had been stomach churning, but, as always, any evidence of their activities had disappeared once the box had been closed.

"Spooky is good."

"Draco and the others were in the ballroom when I left," said Pansy,

"Really?" asked Kingsley. "We've already had a look there, but didn't find anything. Do you know how many people were present last night?"

"Twenty, maybe twenty-five," Pansy answered vaguely.

"We'll need a list of names, if you would," said the Auror.

"I'll write one out for you."

"So... where is it?"

Harry ignored the way Kingsley flinched at the question. He understood the sense of disquiet that his more knowledgeable acquaintances felt whenever the puzzle box became the topic of conversation. He had once felt much the same. Knowing better than to press for an answer, he waited patiently as the Auror collected himself.

Shrugging off his unease, Kingsley motioned down the hallway. "We found it in the manor entry hall."

"So far nobody's been brave enough to do more than look at the damned thing," muttered Tonks as they began to walk, Kingsley leading the way. Falling in step next to Harry, she added, "That's another reason why we called you; no-one here is willing to pick it up."

"Not even you and Kingsley?" asked Harry.

"Bugger that," Tonks snorted. "Kingsley and I actually *know* what it does – even you don't have enough Galleons to pay me to actually hold it!"

"It's perfectly safe, Tonks, you also know that," Harry reminded her.

"Perfectly safe? Try telling that to all its victims."

"Well, perfectly safe as long as you don't try to open it."

"Yeah, and Muggle atomic bombs are perfectly safe so long as you don't push the big red button," Tonks rejoined. "That doesn't mean I'd want to carry one of them around with me."

"Do you know when Draco got hold of it?" asked Kingsley as they stepped into the large foyer.

It was an impressive room, Harry had to admit. All-in-all it was perfectly designed to give an impression of wealth and power to anyone entering by the front door. There was, perhaps, a tinge too much opulence in the décor, a sign of the Malfoy family's decline in recent generations as it grew more and more self-indulgent, with a penchant for showing off their wealth.

And there, resting at the exact centre of the manor's entrance hall; was the Lament Configuration.

"There was a break-in at our Vertik Alley building last night," said Harry, his tone distracted as his interest was focused on the box.

Harry approached without fear, having noticed the absence of the forbidding shadows which tended to gather whenever the box was opened. So long as it was closed and silent, it was utterly harmless. Drawing closer, he saw that the box was not the only thing resting on the polished marble

floor. There seemed to be a something held down by it, protruding slightly from beneath one corner.

Without any hesitation or trepidation, just puzzled curiosity, Harry reached out to pluck it loose. This revealed the addition to be a business card. It was utterly blank, without any form of name or logo adorning its aged yellow face. Turning the card over in his fingers, he found three words printed on the back in bold copperplate.

## **ALL PROBLEMS SOLVED**

Harry could not help himself and quietly chuckled. Picking up the box in his other hand, he rose up and turned back to the others. Kingsley and Tonks were both watching him closely, as was Pansy, though for a different reason. Walking back to where they were standing and fighting not to smile, he handed the business card to Kingsley. The black Auror looked at the card in puzzlement that changed to confusion and then disbelief.

He looked at Harry and asked incredulously, "Leaving a calling card now, are they?"

"So it seems," Harry nodded.

"I guess this confirms it," said Kingsley. "The box ~~was~~ opened and they were here."

"So, Draco really is dead then," concluded Pansy.

Harry stared at her for a long moment, his face studiously blank. He briefly considered telling her that Draco was almost certainly wishing that he were dead, but was just as certainly not going to be that lucky.

"You have our sympathies," he told her at last.

"Thank you," Pansy accepted, out of courtesy.

"Of course, considering it's Draco we're talking about; that's not much," added Tonks.

"Tonks," Kingsley sighed, "you still haven't mastered the concept of tact, have you?"

"What're you complaining about? At least I didn't say that it's pretty much her fault that Draco and his friends are now suffering an eternity of damnation at the hands of unholy monsters," replied Tonks.

"No, no tact at all," concluded Kingsley.

"Unholy monsters?" repeated Pansy, looking incredulously at Harry.

Harry shrugged and said, "Sometimes, to defeat a great evil, you have to use a greater evil."

Pansy considered this for a moment and then nodded. "Almost Slytherin that, Potter." She paused, her eyes drifting down to the exquisitely crafted box that Harry held casually in his hands. "Could I have a closer look at that? I promise I won't try to open it."

Surprised by her request, Harry weighed his options. Deciding not to worry, he could easily stop her before she tried anything, he handed the Lament Configuration into Pansy's waiting hands. He ignored the alarmed expressions on Kingsley and Tonks' faces, though his lips did quirk in a small grin.

Pansy held the box in her hands, cradling it with excessive care. She turned it this way and that, examining each of its surfaces in turn with a critical eye. Her fingers played of the seemingly smooth surfaces, several times brushing lightly over those parts that comprised the mechanism to being the opening sequence. Several times Harry was almost tempted pluck the box from her grasp, but restrained himself.

"Is this what you wanted, Draco?" he heard her ask, more to herself than anyone else. "Well, I hope it's everything you expected it to be."

"I guarantee it's much more than anything he could have imagined," Harry told her.

Pansy looked up as he reached out and stilled her questing hands. She reluctantly allowed him to reclaim the puzzle box, which he promptly slipped into his robe pocket. Harry noted that she was watching him closely, or rather she was watching the box closely; her gaze following its every movement before it disappeared from sight.

He had a feeling that Draco might eventually find himself reunited with his wife.

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*April 13th, 2007*

*St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries*

Draco Malfoy returned to consciousness with remarkable speed and alacrity. Of course, this probably had something to do with the fact that pain, comparable to the Cruciatius Curse, was lancing its way through his skull.

"Sonuvabitch!" he swore, reaching up to clutch his throbbing head with both hands. He knew it was ill-befitting someone of his station to use such vulgarities, but right now he was in too much pain to give a damn.

Finally decided to wake up, did you? What a pity.”

-oOo-

April 14th, 2007

Madingley Grange

Harry stepped into his home with a sigh, relieved to be away from the hubbub surrounding Draco’s disappearance. After spending his afternoon flooing about, first to Locke Keep, then Malfoy Manor and then to the Ministry of Magic, he had opted instead to Apparate home. Closing the door behind him, he paused at the soft sound of voices talking in the lounge.

“Honey, I’m home,” he announced, after hanging up his robes on the nearby coat rack.

“Honey, I’m home?” repeated Hermione dubiously when he entered the lounge.

He shrugged and grinned at her. “Felt appropriate.” He turned to their guest and nodded, his smile cooling somewhat. “Professor Dumbledore, it’s been a while since you called upon us.”

Albus Dumbledore, still going strong as Hogwarts’s headmaster, rose from his seat and shook Harry’s hand. His relationship with the Potters, Harry in particular, had been strained ever since the opening of the Lament Configuration in the Great Hall. Despite the fact that Voldemort’s defeat had been quick, efficient and with very little bloodshed (at least amongst the bystanders), Dumbledore had never been able to condone the means through which Harry had achieved his victory. He had over time come to accept it, if nothing else, but the easy rapport he and Harry had once shared would never recover.

“I imagine you know why I’m here,” said Dumbledore, jumping right to it.

“Is it too much to ask for a friendly visit?” Harry returned, moving to sit next to his wife on the couch.

“Ordinarily, no, but these are not ordinary circumstances.”

Harry grimaced and set the Lament Configuration down on the coffee table between them.

Dumbledore heaved a sigh at the sight of the puzzle box, sitting on the tabletop and looking remarkably innocent in the soft afternoon sunlight. His head drooped down a little, though his eyes remained fixed on the box. “I gather that the Aurors will not be finding anything of poor Draco.”

“And quite a few of his friends as well,” muttered Harry.

“I see,” murmured Dumbledore.

“You’re here earlier than I expected,” Harry commented, waving for Dumbledore to retake his seat.

“Oh?” asked Dumbledore.

“It usually takes several weeks before you come looking for me,” explained Harry. “Draco only solved the puzzle and opened the box last night. It’s been barely half a day since they came for him.” He tilted his head in question and asked, “How did you know?”

Dumbledore sighed and slumped in his seat. “Despite the fact that Draco and most of his friends had managed to escape prosecution for their actions in helping Voldemort storm Hogwarts when you first opened the box, the Ministry and I are... or perhaps I should now say *were* fully aware that they would not accept the change in status quo.”

Harry leaned back and scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Monitoring charms?”

“Applied during their graduation ceremony,” confirmed Dumbledore with a tired nod. “Not the standard ones used by the Ministry, but instead based on those I used to check your own wellbeing during your early childhood.”

“For all the good they did,” muttered Harry, thinking of his time with the Dursleys.

“Yes, quite,” agreed Dumbledore with obvious chagrin. “As you are no doubt aware, however, I have been at a conference in Geneva for the International Confederation of Wizards. I only returned to Hogwarts late this morning, whereupon I learned of Draco’s... unfortunate mishap. I came over right away.”

“Such a rush for someone that is very much beyond your help,” Harry commented.

“Nobody deserves such a fate, Harry,” Dumbledore immediately rejoined.

“I was actually referring to the fact that Draco was long gone by the time you learned of his... circumstances,” corrected Harry dryly.

“Ah, my apologies, I had thought... well...”

“You seem to do that a lot.”

An embarrassed Dumbledore cleared his throat and asked, “Do you have any idea how he came possess the box?”

To this Harry grinned and nodded, "As a matter of fact." As a conjured copy of the business card that had been underneath the box. With a flourish he handed it across to Dumbledore, who peered curiously at it.

"All problems solved," the headmaster read. He looked to Harry, over the rims of his half-moon spectacles and asked, "Draco left this?"

"Not Draco," corrected Harry. "Him."

There was no question as to whom Harry was referring.

"Ah," said Dumbledore.

"Him who?" asked Hermione.

"You know," said Harry. "Him. The leader. The one with all the pins stuck in his head."

"Oh... him."

"Yes, I can imagine there might be some confusion," confessed Dumbledore. "He never mentioned a name and most of those who are aware of the box's true nature are afraid to speak of him... or the box itself, for that matter. In fact, Minerva refers the box as the You-Know-What and him as You-Know-Who."

"The You-Know-What and You-Know-Who?" repeated Hermione incredulously.

"Most confusing, especially when taking into consideration that most people still think of Voldemort as You-Know-Who," agreed Dumbledore with a faint grin

Harry rolled his eyes and muttered, "Bloody idiots can't ever call anything by its proper name."

Dumbledore pushed himself to his feet, rising from his seat not as easy for him as it once was. "I will inform the Minister of last night's events, as well as the results. If he needs any details, I'm sure he will contact you."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay a bit longer, Albus?" asked Hermione. "Harry was just going to cook us some omelettes for a late lunch. You're welcome to join us."

"As tempting as that offer is, I am well aware of the reputation of Harry's culinary skills, I fear I must be going," Dumbledore declined. By now the three had left the lounge and were standing by the front door. Dumbledore gave them both a polite nod of the head. "Harry, Hermione, enjoy your omelettes, and give my regards to your friends," he said and departed. The young couple watched him stroll down the path leading to the lane, whereupon he Disapparated away.

Wrapping an arm around Hermione's slender waist, Harry led them both back inside to the lounge. Once there he sank into his favourite chair and settled Hermione on his lap, burying his face in the nape of her neck. "Bloody bureaucrats," he mumbled.

Hermione giggled and said, "Perhaps you should send the box to some of them - as a surprise present."

"That's only cause more paperwork than there already is," Harry answered, earning some more giggles.

"Such a pretty thing," said Hermione, her attention drawn to the puzzle box, which she reached across the table to claim. She held it up, allowing the light streaming in through the windows to play against the delicate filigree of its faces.

Knowing what she was referring to, without needing to see it, Harry looked up from Hermione's neck and said, "My greatest and most terrible creation."

Hermione nodded in agreement and said, "Definitely an argument for the saying about books and their covers."

Sitting up, Harry reached around her to take the box in hand. He set it down on the table again and then slipped out from beneath her. "I'll take it back to the vault later this evening," he said. "In the meantime; how about that late lunch I promised earlier?"

Reaching out to grab one of Harry's hands, Hermione pulled him down onto his knees beside her. She gave a sultry smile as she leaned close to peck butterfly kisses on and around his mouth. Her hands reached inside his robes and caressed him intimately. "There's something else I'd like to nibble on right now, love," she purred, batting her eyelashes at him. "Lunch can wait a little longer."

With a grin on his face, Harry picked his wife up and carried her back upstairs.

-oOo-

April 13th, 2007

*St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries*

Draco Malfoy returned to consciousness with remarkable speed and alacrity. Of course, this probably had something to do with the fact that pain, comparable to the Cruciatus Curse, was lancing its way through his skull.

"Sonuvabitch!" he swore...

Fin.

-oOo-

**Author's Note:** I never intended to write a sequel to *Evil Be Thou My Good*, but this particular plot bunny started becoming violent, so here you are. Whereas the EBTMG drew more on *Hellraiser* and *Hellbound: Hellraiser 2*, this fic draws heavily upon and owes the bulk of its plot to *Hellraiser: Hellseeker*.

The mystery, suspense and tension as Trevor tries so desperately to find Kirsty is perfectly crafted. It's the only one of the Hellraisers (IMHO) since Clive Barker's original two that does proper justice to the concept of the Cenobites and the box. The others were pretty much just your average horror/slasher/gorefest movies.

While this story does follow on from EBTMG, I hope that it can also stand for itself. EBTMG still had large parts of the original HP story as its base, with subtle changes made to show how Harry's encounter with the Lament Configuration had affected him. *All Problems Solved* is an entirely original work, which I think alters the tone of the story enough that it hasn't turned out as a clone of *Evil Be Thou My Good*.

In any case, it was fun to write and I hope as much fun to read. All Comments Welcome (which sounds very odd to write, considering the title), but please don't expect a third instalment. If I get struck by a satisfyingly original idea, I might write something about it, but beating the horse to death is never a good thing.

Lastly, a present for those of you kind enough to get this far...

-oOo-

*Elsewhere...*

Malcolm Baddock stared at the building before him with a grimace of distaste. This place looked worse off than even the most dilapidated parts of Knockturn Alley. The once white paint had faded to a sickly greyish colour, what little of it could be seen beneath the dirt and grime. It was also peeling away from the walls in places and had actually been stripped away entirely in others.

Still, if the faded and barely legible sign was any indication, this was the place he had been looking for. Returning the business card he was holding back into his robe pocket, Malcolm decided to brave the squalor and stepped inside.

Much to his distress, the interior was not much of an improvement to what could be seen from the outside. If anything, the conditions on the inside were actually a little bit worse. The room fronting the building was empty, save for a crudely written sign which pointed him to a half-closed door at the back. Pushing the door open, using his booted foot, Malcolm discovered a treacherous looking staircase leading down into the depths.

"Ugh," complained Malcolm as he descended. "After this, Knockturn Alley might actually look attractive."

The basement proved to be a small room with a single, bare light bulb. Malcolm sneered at the sight, displeased to discover that this place was so far gone as to use Muggle technology. Directly opposite the stairs was a single door that seemed to be barely clinging to its hinges.

Malcolm twisted the doorknob, which felt as if it had been dipped in half-coagulated blood, and pushed the door open. He was surprised to find that the next room was the exact opposite of what he had been expecting. It was perfectly clean and utterly bare, devoid of anything save a simple counter and stool.

"Excuse me? Hullo?" he called, wondering where whoever owned this business was hiding. Malcolm cautiously stepped up to the empty counter, his hand reaching into his robe for his wand. "Is anyone here?"

"Yes."

The voice, soft yet clear, startled Malcolm more than he cared to admit. He twisted in place, drawing his wand and aiming at the source. The door swung closed with a loud and ominous creak, revealing a person standing up against the wall.

It was an ancient looking Asian man, who looked not unlike an unhealthy Dumbledore. His beard and hair were a dull off-white, blending in with the plain white walls of the room. His dark grey robes were of Oriental cut and seemed almost as old and worn as the man wearing them.

He looked up at Malcolm from his hunched over posture and pinned the wizard with eyes as black as the night. A strange smile, as if he knew a special secret, twisted his gnarled face.

With a faint Asian accent, the old man asked, "What's your pleasure, sir?"